KILLER TRAPPED

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DETECTVE ANUJ SERIES

BY ANIL GARG

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Chapter 1

Lost man

At this moment, I was sitting inside the Keshav Puram police station in Delhi, facing Inspector Narsingh. Besides me, there was a woman, probably around forty years old, with distinct Punjabi features. She had a medium height and fair complexion, but right now, her face looked lifeless, as if she was drowning in deep thought. Next to her sat a man of a similar age, presumably her companion.

"So, you're saying that your husband has been missing for seven days, and you've come to report it today?" Inspector Nar singh, the in-charge of the station, asked in a slightly irritated tone.

"Yes, sir. He often disappears for three or four days without informing us. I assumed he would return like always, but now that a whole week has passed and he hasn't come back, I started getting worried. That's why I came here today," the woman explained, looking at the inspector.

"Where does he usually go during these three-to-four-day disappearances? You must have some idea. Have you checked those places?" Narsingh questioned further.

"What can I say, sir… even at this age, he has fallen for another woman. He keeps going to that cursed woman's house," the woman spat out angrily.

"Then did you check with that woman?" The words escaped my mouth before I could stop myself.

"That's the problem! This time, he hasn't gone there either," the woman replied in a defeated voice.

"Bhabhi, believe me, your husband must have more affairs elsewhere," the man beside her interjected. He seemed to be her husband's younger brother, but he was clearly against his own sibling.

"First, tell me about yourselves. We'll discuss other things later," the inspector said in a tired voice.

"My name is Nidhi. I live in A-1 Colony here. This is Vikram, my husband's cousin," the woman introduced herself and her companion.

"What does your husband do?" Narsingh continued.

"He is in the real estate business. He buys and sells properties," Nidhi replied promptly.

"Alright. Give us his photograph and a written statement with all his details outside. We'll inform you as soon as we get any news about him," Narsingh said, following the standard procedure for missing person cases.

Hearing this, both of them left the room.

As soon as they exited, Narsingh turned to me and asked, "Anuj, what do you think? Where could her husband be?"

"Well, Vikram might be telling the truth. The man probably has multiple affairs, or maybe Nidhi found out about his usual hiding place, so he switched locations this time," I said with a smirk.

"By the way, this woman must be around forty, so her husband is definitely older. Even at this age, he's managing to maintain his charm?" Narsingh asked, grinning at me.

"Inspector sir, he's in the property business, so he must have money. And where there's money, there's indulgence. Age doesn't matter in such cases, especially for men," I remarked philosophically.

"You're absolutely right, Anuj. The whole world has become a slave to money," Narsingh agreed with me. "But tell me, what brings you to my station today?"

"Nothing special. I just heard that you've become an inspector and are now the in-charge of the same station where you once served as a constable. I thought I'd come and pay my respects," I joked.

"It's all thanks to the blessings of brothers like you, Anuj, that I've risen from a constable to an inspector," Narsingh responded humbly. That was his best trait—he never carried the arrogance of a typical cop.

"So, tell me, how's your detective business going?" he asked.

"It's going well. I have a small office near Netaji Subhash Place, with a staff of two people. Including me, we're a team of three," I informed him.

"That's great! I keep hearing about the cases you're solving these days," Narsingh smiled.

"If you ever get a particularly tricky case, remember me. I'll be at your service," I said with a grin.

"First, let me treat you to some coffee! It's been a long time since we've met, so coffee is a must." Saying this, Narsingh rang the bell, and a constable appeared immediately. He ordered two cups of coffee, and after finishing them, I bid farewell to Narsingh and stepped out of the station.

By now, you must have recognized me—I am your old acquaintance, Anuj. I belong to the detective profession, one of the most respected trades in India. But whenever I tell people about my work, they look at me as if I'm some rare creature from a museum. I only take on murder cases. Suspicion, divorce, betrayal, and tailing people—none of these interest me, nor do I ever accept such cases.

Leaving Narsingh's office, I drove towards my office at Netaji Subhash Place, where Ragini and my assistant Naresh were eagerly waiting for me—it was payday, after all, so their impatience was understandable.

As soon as I entered the office, Naresh immediately started preparing tea, while Ragini welcomed me with her signature smile. I absorbed that smile as I walked toward my cabin, with Ragini following me inside.

Ragini was simple yet charming—not extraordinarily beautiful, but certainly not ordinary. She had an undeniable allure that could make anyone fall for her at first glance. However, in this 21st century, she was like a relic from the 16th century—an exception among modern women. She was an expert in martial arts, and I had personally witnessed her skills with weapons in several past cases.

"Anuj sir! Have people in this city stopped killing each other? We

haven’t received a single case lately!" Ragini said in a concerned tone.

"What can we do? Our business depends on murders, but we can’t exactly wish for someone to die," I replied helplessly.

"We didn’t make any money in our last two cases. In fact, we ended up spending our own cash," Ragini recalled the previous investigations. (You all might remember ‘The Dead Man Worth 500 Crores’ and ‘Death Came Silently.’)

"It’s all part of the business. We’ve earned well from this job too," I reassured her.

"So that means all our earnings are still safe in your bank account? You didn’t blow it on gambling and alcohol?" Ragini teased me.

"I only saved enough to pay your salary. The rest is gone," I laughed.

"You should’ve spent my salary too!" she quipped, just like a wife scolding her husband.

"I don’t trust you. If I didn’t pay you, you’d probably take me to labor court," I said seriously, making Ragini burst into laughter.

Just then, Naresh brought two cups of tea. As we sipped, I handed Ragini the salary for both of them—she handled the payments. We quietly enjoyed our tea.

As I placed my empty cup down, my phone rang. The screen displayed Inspector Narsingh’s number. I quickly answered.

"What’s up, Singh sir? Missing me already?" I joked.

"Anuj! Do you remember that woman who filed a missing person report for her husband?" Narsingh asked urgently.

"Yes, the property dealer whose wife said he had multiple affairs," I replied.

"His dead body has been found—in one of his own properties!" Narsingh revealed, making me freeze for a moment.

"That’s strange. From the way she spoke, it didn’t seem like he was in

any danger. Now, suddenly, he’s dead? This doesn’t add up," I said.

"Anuj, let’s take this case as a challenge—let’s see who solves it first!" Narsingh proposed.

"I’m in! This sounds like fun," I accepted immediately.

"Then meet me at the crime scene. I’ll share all forensic reports and autopsy findings with you so it’s a fair competition," Narsingh assured me.

"Deal! Send me the address, and I’ll be there soon," I said, smiling. For the first time, I was about to compete with a cop to solve a murder mystery.

Chapter 2

crime scene

Inspector Nar Singh had sent me an address, which turned out to be an apartment in Keshav Puram. It was merely a ten-minute drive from my office. As I arrived at the given location, I found a large crowd gathered outside. The police had already reached the scene, likely attracting the attention of onlookers.

As I stepped inside the apartment, Inspector Nar Singh stood right in front of me. Beside him, I noticed a woman named Nidhi and her so-called brother Vikram, both appearing somber. My feet instinctively carried me toward them. Nar Singh had already spotted me.

"Where's the body?" I asked as I reached him.

"Inside the bedroom. Come, take a look," Nar Singh gestured for me to follow.

The apartments in Keshav Puram were structured in a typical pattern—a room right after the entrance, followed by a bathroom and a toilet, a kitchen adjacent to it, and then the final room at the end.

I stepped into the last room alongside Nar Singh. A man, appearing to be around forty-five years old, lay motionless on the bed, his lifeless eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. His complexion was strikingly fair—something common among Punjabis, as if they were naturally gifted with it. Two gem-studded rings adorned his fingers, glinting under the dim light, and a gold chain of approximately two tolas still hung around his neck. However, there was something oddly distinct about the scene—the man was stark naked. It seemed as though this flamboyant individual had spent his final moments indulging in pleasure.

What struck me the most was the absence of any signs indicating a struggle or external intrusion. The room appeared too neat, as if someone had meticulously placed the corpse there rather than committing the crime on-site.

"This wasn’t a robbery," I remarked after observing the body.

"That’s obvious, detective. The victim’s gold and jewelry remain untouched. Anything else you notice?" Nar Singh’s voice carried a hint of sarcasm.

"Yes," I smirked. "The man died in the middle of some intimate activity."

"And you deduced that simply because he’s naked?" Nar Singh eyed me with slight amusement.

"Not just that. There’s also a lady’s undergarment peeking from beneath his body," I pointed out.

"You’ve got sharp eyes. I hadn’t even noticed that yet," Nar Singh admitted, slightly embarrassed.

"There are no visible injuries on the body, which means he was suffocated. Most likely, something was pressed against his face until he stopped breathing," I analyzed further.

"I suspect the same. Perhaps with this pillow," Nar Singh pointed to the one lying beside the corpse.

"One more thing," I said, looking at Nar Singh.

"What?" he asked curiously.

"This man wasn’t killed here," I stated.

"How can you be so sure, Anuj?" Nar Singh's expression turned inquisitive.

"The body itself reveals the truth. His eyes are open, meaning he was fully conscious when he was attacked. But what’s intriguing is that there are no signs of struggle. His legs remain completely straight—if he had resisted, his posture wouldn’t be so rigid."

"The killer could have straightened his legs afterward," Nar Singh countered.

"Then why didn’t they close his eyes? A corpse with open eyes is

unnerving—it’s the most chilling sight imaginable. If the murderer took the trouble to adjust the body, they would have shut the eyes as well," I explained.

"That’s a solid point," Nar Singh nodded, seemingly convinced.

"What’s the victim’s name?" I asked.

"His name was Rustam," Nar Singh replied.

"Alright, finish up your legal formalities. Meanwhile, I’ll have a word with the widow," I said, walking toward the main hall. Just then, I noticed a forensic team and a photographer entering the room. Nar Singh followed them back inside, but I decided that speaking with Nidhi was my priority.

Nidhi stood in the outer room with her brother Vikram. By now, a few female relatives had arrived, surrounding her. I signaled for Nidhi to step aside.

She was around forty years old, her face round, complexion fair like her late husband’s, and her deep eyes resembling still waters. However, her excessive weight dulled any charm she might have possessed. As she moved toward me, her gait reminded me of a rolling drum. Her eyes carried a mix of questions and unreadable emotions.

"Do you have any suspicions about who might have killed your husband?" I asked.

"There are many suspects. He had more enemies than friends. Where do I even start?" she sighed.

"Anyone in particular who recently had a serious conflict with him?" I pressed.

"A few days ago, he had a heated argument with his business partner, Santosh, over money. They even drew their pistols. The matter was settled that day, but Santosh repeatedly threatened to kill Rustam," she recalled.

"Anyone else? Perhaps a woman he had a conflict with?" I inquired further.

"He had too many affairs. He spent most of his earnings on women, which is why so many of them hovered around him," she replied without any visible resentment.

"As his wife, didn't his actions anger you? Didn't you ever consider leaving him?" I questioned.

"A woman doesn't always have the luxury to oppose her husband. It becomes even harder when she's completely dependent on him. My family never supported me, and my children are grown now. I had no choice but to adjust," she said, revealing a resigned acceptance.

"Alright, Nidhi. We'll do our best to catch your husband's murderer," I assured her and turned back toward the bedroom.

By now, the forensic team had completed their work. The body was covered with a sheet. Something about Nidhi's cold demeanor unsettled me—she lacked the grief one would expect from a newly widowed woman.

I noticed the forensic team had sealed the blue undergarment in a plastic bag, treating it as crucial evidence. Since Rustam had been suffocated with a pillow, it too was being sent for examination.

"Can this undergarment lead us to the killer?" I asked the forensic officer.

"If there are fingerprints on it, we'll find them. We still need to collect prints from the wife and her brother for comparison. Once we have other suspects, we'll match theirs as well," the officer explained.

"Could this undergarment have been used to gag the victim?" I suggested.

"It's possible, but we'll confirm after forensic tests. That will take at least three days," he responded.

"One thing's certain now," Nar Singh interjected. "This man wasn't killed here. His clothes are missing from the scene, which confirms he was murdered elsewhere and placed here."

"Looks like you've got a solid case, Inspector. The forensic report should

reveal the killer soon," I said.

"So, what's your take on this case, Anuj?" Nar Singh asked as we stepped outside.

"Let's wait for the report. This case isn't as simple as it looks," I said dismissively.

"Why do you think so?" he probed.

"Because Rustam wasn't the kind of man to go down without a fight. If the killer was careless enough to leave so many clues, something bigger must be at play," I reasoned.

"I suppose you learned quite a bit from his wife?" Nar Singh smirked.

"Not much yet. People start talking only when they feel trapped," I replied.

"Fair enough," Nar Singh conceded.

"Alright, call me when the report arrives. Meanwhile, I'll investigate on my own," I said, shaking his hand before walking away.

Chapter 3

Mystery man rustam

I wanted to get out of there and find Santosh... What kind of businessman was he who carried a pistol with him and brandished it even in minor disputes? I decided to roam around that area of Keshav Puram where Rustam lived and had his property office. That pocket of Keshav Puram was not a very large area, and given Rustam's notoriety, anyone could easily point me to his office. So, I left and headed straight for the area where I needed to find Rustam's office.

Finding Rustam’s office didn’t take much effort. The road that connected this pocket to the main road had a shining property dealer signboard that caught my eye from a distance. The board read in an odd manner: "Rustam ka Gareebkhana"—Rustam's Shelter for the Poor. The man had his own style, but this very style had taken him out of this world before his time.

I stopped my car right in front of his office. The office was open, but a crowd of locals had gathered outside. News of Rustam’s murder had spread like wildfire in the area. I parked my car to the side and blended into the crowd outside his office.

"What happened, brother? Why is there such a crowd here?" I asked a stranger, feigning ignorance.

"Oh, brother! Someone killed our Rustam Sahab... Can you believe such a kind man could have enemies?" The man's words were full of admiration for Rustam, which made me pause for a moment. Was Rustam’s image being deliberately distorted to mislead us?

"Who killed such a good man?" I continued the conversation.

"Nobody knows, sir! Only the police will figure that out. But whoever did it committed a great sin... That scoundrel has snatched food from the mouths of many poor people," he cursed the unknown killer.

"Alright... Rustam Sahab had a partner named Santosh. Is he here in the

office?" I finally asked something of my real interest.

"You'll find him at home... He lives right here in the B-2 flats nearby. Do you have some important work with him?" The man seemed quite talkative.

"Yes, I needed to discuss a flat with him. That's why I came here... Anyway, I'll come back another day. Is there anyone in the office who can give me Santosh's contact card?" I probed further.

"I'll get it for you, sir. The cards are lying on the table outside... We come and go here all the time." Saying this, he quickly went into the office. In no time, he returned with two or three cards in his hand.

"Here you go, sir... This card has Santosh's number. But if Rustam Sahab were here, he would've given you a better deal. Santosh is just living off Rustam Sahab's hard work," the man said with some resentment.

I had often noticed that overly talkative people sometimes reveal things they should never say to a stranger.

"Young man, if you spend so much time here, you must know quite a bit about the property dealings in this area," I baited him.

"Oh, sir! I used to give Rustam Sahab information about the deals happening here... Tiger Sahab was a great man. He never denied us our due share after a deal. But this Santosh, he is a scoundrel, always looking to cheat people out of their money," the man, who seemed to harbor a grudge against Santosh, complained.

"Seems like Santosh has cheated you out of your share in some deal. That's why you're so upset with him," I loosened the thread of the conversation a little more.

"Oh, sir! Today, my heart is heavy. Come meet me some other day, and I'll tell you everything. Right now, I just mourn Tiger Sahab's loss," the man said. But despite claiming he didn't feel like talking, he continued to speak.

"Alright, Pyarelal... Why don't you help me find a flat here? Then I

wouldn’t even need to deal with that dishonest Santosh," I offered him a bigger bait.

The man’s face lit up instantly. "Sir, my name is Chaman Lal. Come back in a day or two and meet me here. Just ask anyone for Chaman Lal, and they’ll direct you right away."

Chaman Lal’s garden of hopes had started to bloom.

"Alright, Chaman Lal. I’ll meet you again," I said, extending my hand toward him. He grabbed it as if he were an opposing team’s fielder diving to catch Tendulkar’s shot.

As I turned toward my car, a woman’s loud wailing stopped me in my tracks. Three or four other women were trying to console her, but her cries of sorrow echoed through the entire area. She was probably a relative of Rustam.

I turned back toward Rustam’s house, which was accessible through the same path as his office.

The grieving woman was his sister. Her wails over her brother’s death were enough to bring tears to the eyes of everyone present.

"That wretched woman killed my brother! I had warned him to divorce that whore... She was bound to get him killed someday!" Rustam’s sister’s words made my ears perk up, and my mind started racing.

I had reached close to her. The women accompanying her were trying to take her inside the flat.

From her words, it was clear that she was referring to Rustam’s wife, Nidhi. Did Rustam also feel his life was in danger from Nidhi? The flat where Rustam’s body was found belonged to him, and Nidhi had the easiest access to it.

I had forgotten to ask Inspector Nar Singh one crucial question—who had informed the police about Rustam’s body being in that flat?

What kind of man was Rustam? He had enemies both inside and outside his home. A man should have at least one place in this world where he can sit in peace. But for Rustam, peace was only found in the beds of the

women he spent his nights with.

Why was I even thinking about a dead man? But I had to—my profession required me to consider even the deceased as suspects at times.

I followed the women into the flat. My sole objective at that moment was to speak to Rustam's sister alone. However, the number of arriving relatives kept increasing. I realized I had little chance of meeting her privately.

I changed my plan slightly and stepped out of the flat.

Chapter 4

Meeting with Santosh

At that moment, I wanted to meet Santosh. By now, he must have heard the news of Rustam's death. I took out the card I had obtained from Chamanlal and dialed the number written in front of Santosh's name. The phone rang without delay, and Santosh answered immediately.

"Is this Santosh speaking?" I asked as soon as I heard his voice.

"Yes, this is Santosh. Who is this?" he replied.

"My name is Anuj. You must have heard about Rustam's death by now," I said, leaving the conversation open-ended.

"Yes, I have heard. But why are you asking me about Rustam like this? And who exactly are you?" Santosh asked, slightly irritated.

"Look, the deceased's widow suspects that you were involved in her husband's murder. I am a private detective, and I called you to find out the truth about this matter," I stated clearly and directly.

"Oh, that woman is a complete schemer! What does it matter if she suspects me? She was always ready to have her husband killed herself!" Santosh blurted out his frustration without hesitation. Such unguarded words often proved valuable to an investigator like me.

"Who wanted whom dead will be revealed only after the investigation. For now, tell me, when can we meet?" I asked directly.

"Meet me tomorrow after ten in the morning. Just call before you come," Santosh agreed without hesitation.

"Alright, Santosh. I will call you tomorrow," I said and ended the call.

First Rustam's sister, and now Santosh—both were accusing Nidhi of having a hand in Rustam's murder. Now, I needed to dig into Nidhi's background as well before forming an opinion about her.

For now, I decided it was best to head home. Some mysteries required

deep thinking, and I desperately needed a strong cup of coffee to get my mind working. I started my car and drove towards my apartment.

As soon as I reached my flat, my phone rang with the loud siren tone I had set for police calls. I glanced at the screen—Narsingh's name was flashing.

"Hey, detective, where have you disappeared? You haven't returned since you left!" Narsingh said as soon as I answered.

"There wasn't much point in staying there longer. I went to Rustam's office to gather more information about the case. But there, I only found a crowd mourning his death—so I couldn't talk to anyone," I explained everything in one go.

"Anuj, the deceased, was a well-known man in the area, so it's natural for people to gather at his house. Besides, wealthy people always have plenty of relatives," Narsingh stated the obvious truth.

"Yes, you're right! By the way, how did you learn that Rustam's body was found in that flat?" I asked a question that had been nagging at me.

"We got a call on 100. His wife's so-called brother reported it," Narsingh informed me.

"How did he know Rustam's body was in that flat? A short while ago, they were at the police station filing a missing person's report," I expressed my curiosity.

"I asked him the same thing. He said they had gone there to clean the flat and found Rustam's body in the room. Seeing the body, he immediately called the police," Narsingh answered.

"Doesn't it seem odd that a woman whose husband had been missing for a week suddenly decided to clean a flat that was usually locked up?" My words were followed by a brief silence on the other end.

"You have a point, Anuj. But Rustam disappearing for weeks was normal for them. He often vanished from home and returned on his own," Narsingh responded.

"But that's only the picture those two so-called siblings have painted for

us. We haven’t verified from anyone else whether Rustam actually disappeared like this and then returned on his own," I countered.

"We’ll look into it! We’ll investigate further. I still feel Nidhi is the mastermind behind this," Narsingh said, forming a conclusion I wasn’t sure about yet.

"Anything is possible, my friend. For now, let’s both stay focused on our work. And let me tell you, Mehta Sahib was wrong in thinking this case would be as simple as a multiplication table," I told Narsingh.

"Let’s see what the reports reveal. We haven’t even begun the real investigation yet. Alright, see you tomorrow. Good night," Narsingh ended the call.

I tossed my phone onto the bed and headed to the kitchen to make some coffee.

The next day, I was sitting in front of Santosh. He was around the same age as his business partner, Rustam. His hair was half-grey, and while Rustam was fair-skinned, Santosh was dark—dark enough to resemble the late poet Rahat Indori.

"What was the reason behind your fight with Rustam?" I asked, not wanting to waste time on small talk.

"It was about a property deal. Rustam had become dishonest. He kept a separate cut of around five lakh rupees without informing me. His secret was exposed only when we were finalizing the payment," Santosh explained.

"The fight escalated so much that you both pulled out pistols and threatened to kill each other," I probed further.

"He pulled a pistol, not me. I’ve never owned a pistol in my life," Santosh contradicted Nidhi’s earlier statement.

"But the witnesses say both of you had drawn your guns at each other," I said, scrutinizing his face.

"Who told you that? Nidhi? That woman sleeps with a gun under her pillow! She’s always afraid Rustam might strangle her in the middle of

the night," Santosh revealed a new detail.

"You seem to know a lot about Nidhi—even about her bedroom," I remarked with a smirk.

"Rustam himself used to tell me whenever he was drunk," Santosh defended himself.

"What else did he tell you about his wife?" I asked. Santosh hesitated for a moment but quickly regained composure.

"The root of all their fights was that so-called brother of Nidhi's," Santosh leaned in slightly.

"You mean Vikram?" I recalled his name.

"You know about him too?" Santosh looked a little surprised.

"It's my job to know everything," I replied coolly.

"Vikram is the real reason behind Rustam and Nidhi's troubled relationship," Santosh whispered confidentially.

"But Vikram is her sworn brother. How could he be the cause of their issues?"

"Sworn brother? My foot! That's just a cover-up to hide their illicit relationship. Once, Rustam caught them red-handed in that same flat where his body was found," Santosh inadvertently revealed a big secret.

"But you had a reason to kill Rustam too—he swindled five lakh from you. That could make you wonder how many other times he had cheated you before," I tested his reaction.

"But that's not a strong enough reason for me to kill him. In our business, these betrayals happen all the time. If I started killing for every betrayal, I would have murdered five or seven people by now. Others had bigger reasons to kill Rustam than I did," Santosh hinted at more suspects.

"Who else wanted Rustam dead?" I asked.

"As you dig deeper, detective, the real culprits will start revealing

themselves. But you’re wasting your time suspecting me—I don’t have the guts to kill anyone," Santosh declared.

"Even though you allegedly keep a murder weapon handy?" I challenged him.

"That’s false information. You can search me and my house right now," he insisted confidently.

"Alright, Santosh. If a weapon had been used, I would have conducted a full legal search. But the murderer chose a different method this time. If you remember anything else, call me," I said, handing him my card before leaving.

As I walked out, Santosh called after me, "Look into Nidhi and her ‘brother’ Vikram. You might find the killer sooner than you think."

Chapter 5

Rustam's Final Farewell

Santosh’s words made one thing clear—Nidhi had lied to the police about the reason for visiting that flat. In reality, it was a secret hideout for her and Vikram. Yesterday, they had gone there to meet, but instead, they found Rustam’s lifeless body. In panic, they concocted a new story and presented it to the police.

Now, it was more crucial to bring Vikram into my fold rather than Nidhi, as I had already spoken to her. She wasn’t someone who would easily confess or get caught in a web of words.

I decided to first call Nar Singh to get details about Rustam’s dead body. The entire day would be spent on his last rites, meaning I wouldn’t get a chance to talk to Nidhi for a couple of days. But Vikram—I could reach him sooner. As I dialed Nar Singh’s number, he answered immediately.

“Anuj, if it’s urgent, speak quickly. I’m with ACP sir right now,” he said, making his busyness clear.

“I just need to know if Rustam’s body has been handed over to his family after the post-mortem,” I asked directly.

“It will be handed over by 2 PM. The post-mortem is still ongoing,” he replied.

Hearing this, I hung up. Finding Vikram at home was out of the question—he was likely waiting outside the post-mortem house. I checked my watch; it wasn’t even noon. The best option was to head to my office at Netaji Subhash Place. After lunch, I could visit Vikram.

I turned my car toward Britannia Chowk. Rustam’s office was on the same route, and as I passed by, I saw a huge crowd gathered outside, mourning his death. It was expected. I glanced at the crowd briefly and then proceeded to my office.

“Your Holiness! Sometimes, please inform your poor staff about your whereabouts so we can tell your female admirers where to find you,”

Ragini quipped the moment she saw me.

I didn't know what kind of boss I was, but my staff never missed a chance to tease me.

"Oh, so you couldn't tell them where I was? Is that why they've all come to the office looking for me? Go check outside; there must be a long queue," I countered.

"No, sir! This crowd is here after seeing your marriage advertisement in today's newspaper," she shot back.

"If I get married, this ghost sitting in the office will remain unmarried forever," I smirked.

"How would I remain unmarried if you get married?" Ragini questioned, visibly annoyed.

"So, you admit that you are the ghost?" I grinned.

"No! You mentioned a ghost in the office, and I am the only one here," she retorted, flustered.

"I said 'a ghost.' I never said it was you. If someone assumes they're a ghost, is it my fault?" I teased.

"If I really were a ghost, I'd stick to you so tightly that no exorcist could separate us," she fired back.

"Go ahead! Who's stopping you?" I smirked meaningfully.

"Nares! Bring a bottle of Fevicol. Let's show him what sticking really means," she called out to our office assistant.

"Ma'am, I was making tea for sir. I'll bring the Fevicol later," Naresh laughed, dodging her request.

Ragini shot him a death glare as I victoriously walked into my cabin. Today, for the first time in a while, she didn't follow me inside. She was probably plotting her revenge. Just then, Naresh entered with two cups of tea, and Ragini, putting aside her plans, walked in too.

"What happened in that case? The one you bet on yesterday?" she asked.

“I’m still on it. Just came back from investigating. There are several suspects; this case seems quite tangled,” I replied, sipping my tea.

“I’m sure your inspector friend already sensed the complexity of this case, which is why he tricked you into investigating it,” she suggested.

“No, he called me as soon as he got the case. He hadn’t even formed an opinion yet,” I clarified.

“Will you need me and your informer in this case?” she asked.

“Of course! Can I solve any case without you two? I’ll call you when needed,” I assured her.

“Oh no! I just had tea at the wrong time. I actually came here for lunch,” I realized suddenly.

“No problem! By the time your lunch arrives, the tea will digest,” she joked.

“Or better yet, give me your homemade lunch, and order food for yourself. I barely get to eat home-cooked meals,” I pleaded.

“You never come to the office regularly. Otherwise, I’d bring food for you too,” she complained.

“Just for today, please? If you bring food daily, I’ll get used to it, and one day, this habit will become a burden for you,” I reasoned.

“So, you think I’d consider feeding you a burden?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“No, that’s not what I meant! Don’t be upset. It’s just that I don’t come to the office daily. If you bring food and I don’t show up, it would go to waste,” I explained.

But she didn’t wait for my explanation. She left, fetched her lunchbox, placed it in front of me, and sent Naresh to bring food for herself. The silence in my cabin confirmed that she was truly upset. Normally, she was never this quiet.

After lunch, I headed toward Rustam’s house. My goal was to talk to

Vikram—the next crucial link in this case. If Vikram and Nidhi had a personal conflict, it could be the strongest motive for murder. But I couldn't bluntly ask them about their relationship. I needed solid proof before confronting them.

Lost in thought, I reached Rustam's house. His body had arrived, and the air was filled with mourning cries. I parked my car a little further away and started scanning the crowd. I was looking for Vikram—and also for Manohar, a man who was like the town's gossipmonger. People like him often proved useful.

I spotted Vikram surrounded by people. He had met me twice before, so approaching him wouldn't be difficult. He still believed I was a cop, as neither he nor Nidhi knew I was a private detective. Their assumption was to my advantage.

However, at that moment, everyone was busy preparing to take Rustam's body to the cremation ground. Vikram soon slipped inside the house. I followed.

Inside, I saw Rustam's sister—the same woman who had accused Nidhi of murdering her brother the day before. Now, she sat in a corner, silent, as if her tears had dried up. I approached her. It wasn't the right place or time to talk, but I thrived on such moments.

"Are you Rustam's sister?" I asked.

She looked up at me with teary eyes and nodded.

"I need to talk to you about Rustam's murder. I know this isn't the right time or place, but I'm sure you want his killers to be caught as soon as possible," I said carefully.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Anuj. I'm working on catching your brother's murderers," I replied vaguely.

"Oh! So you're with the police?" she asked in her thick Punjabi accent.

"Something like that," I smiled.

“Listen, son, I can’t talk here. Give me your number, and I’ll call you later,” she said.

I handed her my card, and she quickly took it. Without saying another word, I stepped out. The women had gone to the cremation ground. I had missed my chance to observe Nidhi’s and Vikram’s interactions—for now.

Chapter 6

My favourite pyarelal

I sat down at a tea stall nearby, waiting for people to return from the cremation ground. I asked the tea vendor to make me a cup of tea.

"Brother, was it some big shot who passed away? Quite a crowd was following the funeral procession," I asked the tea vendor, hoping to gauge his opinion as a neighbor of Rustam. He gave me a quick glance. If you want to know everything about a neighborhood, just visit a local barber's shop or a roadside tea stall. You just need to start the conversation, and I had already done that.

"Sir, it's not right to speak ill of the dead, but in Delhi these days, two things are highly valuable—land and cunningness. And this man had both in abundance," the tea vendor said in a rather fancy manner.

"So that's why there was such a huge crowd behind him," I said, looking at him with interest.

"Yes, sir. These days, only such people attract a crowd. If you or I were to die, not even a stray dog would glance our way. It's all about money," he added, his tone revealing his resentment toward the wealthy.

"Why did you call him cunning?" I pushed the conversation forward.

"Sir, I haven't seen you around before," the tea vendor asked cautiously, scanning the surroundings.

"I was just passing by and saw such a big crowd, so I stopped. Then I noticed your tea stall and felt like having a cup of tea. That's why I came here," I replied. My words seemed to put him at ease. Now that he knew I was an outsider, he could open up freely.

"Sir, they say one shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but death doesn't turn someone's wrongs into rights," he said, looking at me for validation.

"So you mean to say the deceased wasn't a good person?" I asked, locking eyes with him.

"Not at all, sir. He was the most despicable man I have ever seen. He lured people with dreams of owning a home but didn't even leave them capable of affording a rental," his voice lowered as he spoke. His sharp eyes continued scanning the surroundings.

"Even then, how did his funeral attract such a large crowd?" I asked, expressing my curiosity.

"Not everyone knows the truth, sir. People follow the herd. My shop is right here; I didn't go to bid him farewell," he said, handing me my cup of tea.

"Did he cheat a lot of people? Taking their money and not giving them their houses?" My interest in Rustam's dark side had increased.

"Many people, sir! Some even took him to court, but there's a saying: 'Who's greater, a shameless man or God?' Nobody could touch such a shameless person," he said bitterly.

"You make excellent tea, Pyarelal. Give me another cup," I said. I still had a lot to learn.

"Sir, I've been making tea for years; that's why I'm still here," he said proudly.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Twelve years, sir. This tea stall has been my livelihood."

"Tell me, how did he cheat people?" I returned to my main query.

"Sir, people like him are incredibly cunning. And people willingly walk into their traps. Take Shyamlal from Neemdi Colony—this man took twenty-five lakh rupees from him. That poor man exhausted himself running after him, but Rustam never returned a single penny," Pyarelal revealed another secret.

"Twenty-five lakh is a huge amount, Pyarelal. Someone could kill for that kind of money," I said, expressing my thoughts.

"Some people do, sir. But that poor man had two daughters to care for. If he had killed Rustam, who would have looked after his daughters

while he rotted in jail?" Pyarelal said, his voice heavy with sympathy.

"I also live in Neemdi Colony. You mentioned Shyamlal—do you know more about him?" I asked with hopeful eyes.

"Oh, sir! If you live there, then you must know the old authority office. Shyamlal has a small grocery shop right next to it. You can ask him anytime. I am not lying," he said, thinking I doubted his story.

"Why would you lie to me, Pyarelal?" I reassured him.

"But sir, I never told you my name. How did you know?" he asked, surprised.

I smiled. This was the second time someone had turned out to be a real Pyarelal after I called them that.

"Someone told me that there's a famous tea stall next to Rustam's property office in Keshav Puram. They said, 'Try Pyarelal's tea once, and you'll forget your wife's tea forever.'" I flattered him.

"Wow, sir! Is my shop famous?" He beamed with pride.

"Absolutely, Pyarelal. You really make great tea. That's why I had two cups in one go." I handed him the money.

"Sir, whenever you're around, be sure to stop by for tea. I enjoyed talking to you," Pyarelal said in an ingratiating tone.

"I certainly will, Pyarelal. I have some work in this area these days, so I'll be coming around frequently," I said, keeping his hopes alive. He kept watching me until I disappeared from his sight.

Talking to Pyarelal had revealed a new side of Rustam. He was not only a property dealer but also a fraud who deceived people and silenced them with his influence. This was a dangerous aspect. Who knew how many people he had wronged? Perhaps one of his victims had killed him. A new possibility had opened up before me.

A person's true nature is often revealed through their neighbors. That had always been my experience. So far, I had spoken to two people about Rustam—one was his devotee, and the other his staunch critic. But

Pyarelal’s words seemed more logical. It looked like I would have to drink tea at his stall several more times.

I started my car and turned towards the police station. After tea, I felt like having coffee with Nar Singh.

By the time I reached the station, the ACP had already left. I found Nar Singh in his office. He looked up at me and smiled, gesturing for me to sit.

"Tell me, Anuj Babu, where are you coming from?" Nar Singh asked casually.

"Just came from Rustam’s house, but it was a waste of time. They are all at the cremation ground," I replied.

"Yes, they got the body around two o’clock. They must be there now. I’ll go in the evening to question them," he said, flipping through a file.

"What’s your take on the case so far?" I asked.

"We haven't started questioning yet. So far, we’ve just been following legal procedures. The way the police work is very different from how a private detective works," Nar Singh said, looking at me.

"Of course! The police can rough someone up and make them confess. A detective has no such powers," I replied, making him smile.

"That power has been given to us by the law. Why shouldn’t we use it?" Nar Singh retorted.

"Exactly my point! That’s why our methods are different," I countered.

"So, what have you found so far?" Nar Singh asked.

"Don’t jump to conclusions yet! Rustam had more enemies than friends," I warned.

"We’re also analyzing CCTV footage from around his flat," Nar Singh informed me.

"Good. Then I’ll be off. See you tomorrow. By then, reports should be in," I said, shaking his hand.

I left the station and headed to Neemdi Colony to meet Shyamlal. I needed to find out why he had given Rustam such a huge sum of money.

Chapter 7

Meet with shyamlal

It didn’t take me long to find Shyamlal’s shop. It was just one among the many small shops lined up in the market. Shyamlal was present at his shop, an old man probably in his sixties. His face bore the marks of a hard life, a man defeated by time and circumstances. If Rustam had indeed deceived such a man, it was truly unjust.

"Are you Shyamlal?" I asked as I reached his shop.

"Yes, I am. But who are you? I don’t recognize you," Shyamlal peered at me from behind his glasses.

"You must have heard by now that Rustam was murdered. I need to speak to you regarding that," I said bluntly.

"Yes, I know that someone killed him yesterday... But why do you want to talk to me about it?" He looked at me with questioning eyes.

"Your 2.5 million rupees were taken by that man. That makes it necessary to speak with you about his murder," I replied.

Shyamlal was visibly shocked upon hearing this.

"How do you know this? We never told anyone that Rustam took our 2.5 million rupees," he asked, still puzzled.

"It's my job to know such things, Shyamlal ji. Now tell me, how did you end up losing that money to him?" I probed with sharp eyes.

"But first, tell me who you are and how you know all this?" He was more interested in clearing his doubts about me first.

"My name is Anuj. I’m a private detective, investigating Rustam’s murder and trying to find his killer. That’s why I’m here," I clarified.

Shyamlal may not have fully understood my profession, but he certainly understood the words "murder" and "investigation," which was enough for him to assume I was some kind of cop.

"Sir, that was a long time ago... We had already forgotten about that fraud and Rustam as well," he said in a tired voice.

"2.5 million is not a small amount, Shyamlal ji. From your appearance, it looks like that was your life's savings. How could you just forget it?" I questioned with disbelief.

"You're right, sir. No one can forget. But when a man begs for justice at every doorstep and finds no one willing to listen, he is forced to forget everything in helplessness," his words left me momentarily speechless.

"What exactly happened?" I asked, wanting to hear the full story.

"Sir, first come inside and sit comfortably. I'll get you something to drink," Shyamlal was ready to share his story. I agreed and followed him inside his shop. He called out to someone for tea.

"Three years ago, I found a leaflet in the newspaper about a flat for sale in Rohini. You know how valuable property in Rohini is. I had recently sold some land in my village and wanted to invest in property. When I called the number on the leaflet, it turned out to be Rustam's. He called me to his office in Keshavpuram and showed me a flat in a remote area of Rohini, which I liked." He called out for tea again.

"Tea will come, you continue," I urged him impatiently.

"The deal was finalized at 2.5 million rupees. Within a month, I made the full payment and got the documents. My whole family was thrilled. We locked the flat and came back home," Shyamlal said, but before he could continue, a young girl, around twenty, arrived with a tray carrying two cups of tea. He took the tray from her and offered me a cup before she left.

"Your home must be nearby; it seems like you got the tea from there," I commented.

"Yes, sir. My house is just behind the shop. My voice reaches there easily," he replied with a small smile.

"What happened next?" I asked, taking a sip of the tea.

"About twenty days later, I went to check on the flat and found other

people living there. My heart sank. I asked them who they were, and they told me they were the real owners of the flat. They had been posted in another city earlier, so the flat was vacant. Now that they were back in Delhi, they had moved in," his voice trembled as he recalled the incident.

"Rustam had sold me the flat using forged documents. The real owners had all the original papers," he said, looking at me with helpless eyes.

Property frauds like these were common, but for a man like Shyamlal, it was a devastating blow.

"What did you do next? You must have confronted Rustam?" I asked.

"I did. And I kept going to him for two years. I had lost everything. At home, it was just me and my two daughters. If I left the shop to fight the case, even the shop would collapse, and we would starve. There were countless fights, court cases, but nothing came out of it. In the end, I gave up and focused on running my shop. Now tell me, sir, how can a man like me, who couldn't even recover his money, commit a murder?" His voice was filled with defeat.

"But if you had the strength to kill him, would you have done it?" I asked him an unusual question.

"Yes, I would have... if I had someone to take care of my children afterward," he replied without hesitation.

"You fought with him for two years. Did you ever find out if he had cheated others as well?" I continued my questioning.

"Sir, Rustam's entire business was based on fraud. He sold fake properties to people and took their money without delivering anything," Shyamlal said after thinking for a moment.

"A man like that couldn't have run his business openly for long. He would have had to flee at some point. Not everyone is as helpless as you," I pointed out.

"He was a shameless man, sir. He didn't care about his reputation. Hardly a day passed without some fight or dispute at his office," Shyamlal revealed a shocking fact.

Rustam’s personality was still a mystery to me. His wife saw him as a womanizer. His neighbors knew him as a con artist. And yet, he operated so openly, deceiving people without any consequences. A man like him should have had multiple complaints filed against him at the police station. But from Inspector Nar Singh’s reaction, it seemed like he was hearing Rustam’s name for the first time.

"Alright, Shyamlal ji, if you remember anything else about Rustam, call me at this number. If needed, I will come back to you," I said, handing him my card. He took it reluctantly, probably not wanting to get involved in a murder case.

I left his shop and checked my watch. It was 7 PM. It was time to head back to my place.

The next day, I finally caught up with Vikram…

Chapter 8

Cleopatra, the Living Taj Mahal

Finding Gurpreet, aka Pammi's, flat didn't take much effort. I rang the imperial-sounding doorbell... the chime echoed inside... after a brief moment, the door opened... and I was left completely stunned.

The woman who answered the door was breathtakingly beautiful. If Rustam had fallen into her trap, it wasn't surprising at all. Had she been in Clinton's office, even Clinton himself would have been caught in her web. Your humble narrator stood there, gaping at this Cleopatra-like enchantress.

Perhaps she was used to men like me behaving like this, so she just smiled faintly at me. But when my eyes refused to waver, she had to break the silence.

"Done staring? Now, tell me who you are and why you rang the bell," she asked, her voice as melodious as a temple bell.

Her voice snapped me out of my trance. "I wanted to talk about Rustam."

At the mention of Rustam's name, a faint change swept over her rosy complexion, but it did nothing to diminish her ethereal beauty.

"Who are you?" The temple bell chimed again.

"I'm Anuj," I replied, still mesmerized. Usually, I could introduce myself in a single breath, but right now, I could barely utter my name.

"Anuj who?" A trace of worry flickered on her flawless face, an injustice to such beauty.

"I'm a private detective. I assume you've heard about Rustam's murder. I'm here to ask you some questions about it." I had finally managed to break free from her spell and return to my real purpose.

"I don't usually let people inside... but you may come in." She spoke as if she were granting me a great favor.

I stepped into the dreamland of this divine beauty.

"Sit," the celestial being rang her temple bell once more.

I obediently sat where she gestured.

"Now, tell me—what do you want to ask about Rustam?" She fixed her captivating gaze on me.

"How long have you known Rustam?" I threw my first question at her.

"When did I say I knew him?" she immediately vetoed my question.

"Then maybe he knew you?" I countered smoothly.

"Ah, now you're speaking correctly," she replied with a smile that revealed pearls for teeth. I wondered which heavenly workshop God had hidden away to create such a masterpiece, bringing it to life on some rare holiday.

"Tell me about your relationship with Rustam," I asked, shaking off her beauty's enchantment.

"What relationship could I possibly have with that scoundrel? He swallowed ten lakh of mine and died!" Her response made my head spin. Rustam had been working his magic here too. What a man!

"So, he scammed you too?" I asked, observing her closely.

"Yes! That crook survived purely on sweet talk. He lured me into investing ten lakh in a project that never existed!"

Pammi—it was hard to believe such a mundane name belonged to such an extraordinary woman. She should have been named Cleopatra or Lady Diana. No Indian name could do justice to her beauty.

"How did you fall for his scheme?" I questioned again.

"His plan was foolproof. He promised to double my money in six months. The government had announced a new highway project, and he convinced me to invest in land near the site. He claimed that once construction started, the land's value would skyrocket."

As she spoke, the woman who stole other people's dreams seemed lost in a dream of her own.

"And then?" My voice brought her back to reality.

"Then what? News about the highway project was everywhere at that time. I believed him. Plus, he had such an impressive aura that anyone would trust his words instantly. So, I handed him ten lakh." She gave her temple bell a brief rest.

"And then?" If it were up to me, I could sit there all day, just watching her speak. Every beautiful woman knows what effect she has on a man, and she secretly enjoys it.

"Then the government changed, and the highway project was shelved. I don't even know if Rustam ever bought that land. He never showed me any papers. All I know is that my ten lakh never came back." Her final words no longer sounded like temple bells—they were mournful like a funeral hymn.

"Did you ever ask him to return your money?" I pressed further.

"Many times! But that scoundrel kept showing me new dreams—promising to invest my money elsewhere. And time just kept slipping by." She drifted into the deep ocean of her sorrow, and it was my duty to rescue this divine beauty from her grief.

"Amazing! Looking at you, anyone would give you their entire fortune, yet that fool chose to rob you instead!" I, for the first time, spoke in her favor.

She looked at me with sparkling eyes, and a smile, radiant enough to shake the world, graced her lips. Her smile breathed life into every object in that room.

"Why do you think someone would be willing to give me their entire fortune?"

Every woman knows her own allure, but she still enjoys hearing it from a man's lips. And since your humble narrator was born to sing praises of beauty, I had no qualms fulfilling her desire.

"Has your mirror never introduced you to yourself?" I finally embraced my true nature.

"Forget the mirror! I want to hear your honest opinion," she insisted, looking at me with those intoxicating eyes.

At that moment, I felt that if she had murdered Rustam, I would have gladly taken the blame myself, even if it meant swinging from the gallows. But for now, there was no sign of her being guilty. In fact, she seemed more like another victim of Rustam's schemes.

"Tell me honestly—would you have killed Rustam for your ten lakh?" I asked, not knowing what prompted me to be so reckless.

"Shall I tell the truth?" She cast a piercing look at me.

"One hundred percent," I assured her.

"If fate had written even a single murder in my destiny, I would have chosen to kill Rustam!"

Hearing her words, I realized—everyone wanted Rustam dead. What kind of life had he been living?

"But I heard you had Rustam trapped in your web," I countered, breaking free from her enchantment.

"Which newspaper printed that nonsense? I never read it! People dream of trapping me, not the other way around!" She dismissed the accusation with delicate elegance.

"Rustam's family published that newspaper. That's why I was so eager to meet you."

"Then it must have been that idiot Vikram spewing his venom," she said, as if she had just swallowed something bitter.

Just then, I noticed something in her apartment that made me pause and reconsider everything. Something that sent my thoughts spiraling into a deep mystery…

Chapter 9

The Panty Dilemma

I had now turned my car towards the police station to meet Inspector Nar Singh. According to my thoughts, I had met more people in this case than the police had so far. However, the matter had not progressed beyond conversations yet. Inspector Nar Singh was not in his office at the moment; he had gone out for a patrol in the area. I decided to call him instead—something I should have done before coming here. Perhaps the charm of that beauty was still lingering in my mind.

But even at this time, Nar Singh was not answering my call… maybe he was caught up in another mess. These policemen have their hands full with a hundred different problems. Just as I was about to leave the station, a police jeep entered the premises. The man stepping out of it was none other than Inspector Nar Singh.

"I knew you'd be at the station, so I didn't pick up your call," Nar Singh said with a smile, covering up his embarrassment.

"No worries, my lord… I am merely your subject. You may bestow your attention upon me whenever you please," I teased him lightly.

"Hey, bring two coffees… our esteemed guest is upset with us," Nar Singh caught my sarcasm and responded in kind. He grabbed my hand in a way that made it seem as if he was genuinely concerned about my displeasure and led me to his office.

"The forensic and post-mortem reports have arrived," Nar Singh said as he sat in his chair.

"What do they say?" I asked eagerly.

"Rustam died due to suffocation… and the most surprising part is that there were no marks on his body," Nar Singh said, looking at me.

"He must have been smothered with a pillow… even the corpse's position indicated that. Rustam's open eyes were facing the ceiling," my mind had now emerged from the spell of that beautiful woman.

"But the pillow we found near the body had no traces on it," Nar Singh said, looking at me thoughtfully.

"It's simple! Since the body was brought there from somewhere else, why would the murderer carry along the pillow they used to suffocate the victim?" My logic left Nar Singh speechless.

"But the panty we found there… nothing was found on it either," Nar Singh mused aloud.

"Then maybe that panty was already there… don't tell me that flat was a known lover's spot," I said, smirking at Nar Singh.

"That's also a possibility… just like what we initially suspected," Nar Singh admitted.

Just then, a constable arrived with two mugs of coffee.

"What does the post-mortem report say about the time of death?" I asked.

"According to the report, he died 24 hours before the body was found," Nar Singh replied, picking up his coffee mug.

"Meaning, the day before the corpse was discovered," I calculated mentally.

"Yes," Nar Singh confirmed with a nod.

"Did you show that panty to Rustam's wife to see if she recognized it?" I asked Nar Singh.

"Even knowing that her answer would be a no, I still asked," Nar Singh said.

"And the answer was no," I reiterated.

"Yes," Nar Singh said, nodding in agreement.

"I want to take another look at that panty," I said to Nar Singh.

"Why? Did it remind you of someone?" Nar Singh joked.

"I keep my distance from such things… I'm a bachelor. Who knows

when my honor might be at risk?" I replied in the same playful tone. Nar Singh then called in a constable.

"Go call SI Dilbagh," Nar Singh ordered. The constable promptly left.

"Did you talk to Nidhi and Vikram?" I inquired about their previous interrogations.

"Yes, but they're still singing the same tune as before," Nar Singh replied with disappointment.

"We don't even have any solid evidence yet to bring them under suspicion," I said, looking at Nar Singh.

"We'll find evidence… after all, someone had to have killed him," Nar Singh said, now deep in thought like a philosopher.

"You're right, but in this case, you're going to cross paths with a lot of people. The victim didn't have a very clean record," I warned Nar Singh.

"Yes! We even found a file of his misdeeds here at the station. He had deceived many people, but for the past year, he had been lying low. There had been no new complaints against him. That's why, when his wife came to file a missing person report, I didn't recognize him immediately," Nar Singh explained, and I understood why he hadn't known Rustam.

"I have already met two of Rustam's deceived victims… and interestingly, everyone was out for his blood, but no one actually killed him," I told Nar Singh, who now looked at me with great interest.

"Brother, you're speeding through this case at 200 km/h… looks like you plan to solve it within 72 hours!" Nar Singh joked again.

"Even if we crack it in a week, consider it a miracle. This case is full of complications. The forensic report didn't help either… what Mehta Sahab was claiming turned out to be completely baseless," I said, looking at Nar Singh.

Just then, SI Dilbagh entered the room.

"Yes, sir… you called?" Dilbagh asked respectfully.

"Yes, bring in the reports and evidence from the Rustam case," Nar Singh ordered. Dilbagh left promptly.

"Is Dilbagh Singh the investigating officer for this case?" I asked Nar Singh, just making conversation.

"Yes! Someone has to keep the paperwork in order," Nar Singh replied. Soon, Dilbagh returned with a file in his hands.

"Here you go, sir," he said, placing the file in front of Nar Singh.

"Alright, Dilbagh! You can go. I'll call you if needed," Nar Singh dismissed him.

"Here's your panty… still has a lingering fragrance," Nar Singh joked, sliding the panty towards me.

"You enjoy its scent, sir… it belongs to you now. I just needed to see its color and design," I retorted in a light-hearted manner.

"Alright then! I have to leave… just remembered an important task," I suddenly got up, leaving Nar Singh baffled.

"Did the panty give away the killer's scent? Why are you leaving so abruptly?" Nar Singh asked, bewildered.

"One last thing—what was the exact time of death?" I asked before stepping out.

"Between 5 and 7 in the evening," Nar Singh answered without hesitation.

Hearing his response, I immediately rushed out of the station.

Chapter 10

Interrogation of Neighbors

At that moment, I was in Keshav Puram, right outside the same flat where Rustam's body had been found. The police had sealed the flat, and I was lost in thought about the moment I had first seen Rustam's corpse. His open eyes were staring at the ceiling, which meant he had been fully conscious and awake at the time of his death. If someone had suffocated him by pressing his mouth shut, he would have certainly struggled. His legs wouldn't have been straight; they should have been bent. Because if there was only one murderer, it would have been impossible to control both Rustam's mouth and legs at the same time. This meant that at least two people had killed Rustam.

The strange thing was that the room where Rustam's body was found had been meticulously cleaned, as if someone had just swept it. Yet, everyone in the neighborhood mentioned that the flat remained locked most of the time.

The murderer had left no evidence behind. No fingerprints, no clues of any kind. If Rustam had brought a woman there for pleasure, especially one who wasn't his wife, he would have carried some items of indulgence. But nothing of that sort was found—except for a single panty tucked under the same pillow that was used to suffocate him. What could have been the killer's intention behind leaving that panty there? The murder had taken place between 5 and 7 in the evening—a time when this neighborhood was never deserted. That meant if Rustam had come here with a woman before 5 PM, someone must have seen them. It was impossible that no one had noticed them. And if someone had seen them enter, surely someone must have seen that woman leaving the flat as well.

But why hadn't this angle surfaced in the police investigation yet? It had been three days since the murder, and there was still no clue about the killer. The only piece of evidence—the panty—seemed to be planted, merely to mislead the investigation.

My next step was clear: I needed to find someone in the neighborhood who had seen Rustam that day.

I scanned the surroundings of the flat and noticed an elderly woman sitting outside the adjacent flat on a chair. I approached her first. As I stood before her, she looked up at me.

"Ma'am, may I ask you something?" I said politely.

"What is it, son? Speak," she replied, her eyes full of curiosity.

"I wanted to ask about Rustam, who lived next door," I said.

"Son, the police already questioned us, and we told them we didn't see anything. Who are you?" The elderly woman crushed my hopes before I could even begin my inquiry.

"I am from the secret police division. Any information shared with us is kept completely confidential, including the identity of the informant," I bluffed.

"Whether you keep it secret or print it on posters, it doesn't matter. We didn't see anything, so what can we tell you?" The old woman was sharp; she had seen enough of the world to not fall for my tactics.

I looked at her helplessly and decided to make one last attempt.

"Do you sit here like this every day?" I asked an irrelevant question.

She glanced at me with slight annoyance. "Yes, son, I sit here every day! Do you have a problem with that?"

Now it was clear from her expression that she was about to lash out at me.

"Are you sitting here at this exact time every day?" I ignored her rising temper and asked again.

"Yes, I sit here all day. This is my house—I can sit here day or night as I please. Who are you to ask?" she snapped.

"Then why are you lying?" I had finally decided to challenge her.

"What lie have I told?" The volume of her voice was increasing, and soon a crowd would gather.

"Do you realize that withholding information about a crime or a criminal is a legal offense?" This time, I played my trump card, which seemed to hit the mark.

"But I haven't lied about anything, so what can the law do to me?" Her tone had softened slightly.

"You said you sit here all day. Then why didn't you report seeing Rustam enter the flat with a woman at 4 PM? If that's not a lie, then what is?" I had gained the upper hand.

"Which day are you talking about?" The old woman was not one to surrender easily.

"The day before Rustam was murdered," I replied sternly.

"But wasn't he murdered the day before yesterday? That day, I didn't see anyone coming here—only his wife with another man unlocking the flat," she revealed.

Her answer set off alarm bells in my mind.

"Rustam wasn't murdered the day before yesterday—his murder took place a day before that. The police only discovered his body the day before yesterday. So, Rustam must have come here that day; otherwise, how did his body end up in the flat?" I asked, staring at her.

Instead of answering, the old woman turned towards the house and called out, "Savita, come outside."

A thirty-something woman, who looked like a traditional Indian daughter-in-law, came out.

"Savita, weren't we sitting here until 7 PM the day before Rustam's body was found?" the old woman asked.

"Yes, we were sitting here for quite a while. What happened, Maaji?" Savita looked at me curiously.

"This gentleman is from the police. He wants to know if we saw Rustam entering his flat with someone that day," the old woman explained.

"No, we didn't see him. That evening, I was sitting here with our neighbor, Chachi Ji. If Rustam had come, Maaji would have noticed because he always greeted her before entering his flat," Savita stated confidently.

I had no reason to doubt her words.

"Thank you very much, Savita Ji. And Maaji, if I have offended you in any way, please forgive me," I said, folding my hands in respect, and left without waiting for her response.

Their statement only reinforced my suspicion that Rustam had been murdered elsewhere, and his body was dumped in the flat. The planted panty was meant to fabricate the illusion that he had been with a woman who had killed him before fleeing.

As I walked a little further, I spotted a cold drink shop and decided to get a drink. A young man, around twenty-two, was sitting at the counter.

"Heard about the murder in your neighborhood? I heard he was a big-shot," I casually started a conversation while sipping my drink.

"Yes, sir. Rustam Ji was quite a big man. His death is a big loss for us too," the young man said with a sigh.

"Loss? Did he owe you money?" I asked.

"No, sir. He was very punctual with payments. But whenever he came, he used to buy stuff worth at least two to three hundred rupees. That business is gone now," the young man explained.

"So he always bought something from you whenever he visited?" I asked lightly.

"Yes, sir. A pack of Gold Flake cigarettes was a must. Sometimes soda and snacks with alcohol too."

"Did he buy anything on the day he was murdered?" I continued.

"Oh no, sir. It had been a week since we last saw him. We only heard about his death afterward."

"But if his body was found in the flat, he must have come here, right?" I tested him.

"Not during the day. Maybe he came after our shop closed at night."

His answer confirmed it—Rustam hadn’t visited the flat alive that day.

Chapter 11

Another Visit to the Taj Mahal

On the day of Rustam’s murder, two people had completely denied the possibility of him being there. One of them had only provided this information by sheer coincidence. But both of them confirmed my suspicion that Rustam had been killed somewhere else, and his body had been placed here.

According to that old lady, on the day the body was discovered, she had seen Nidhi unlocking the flat’s door. She had also seen a man with her, who was most likely her lover, Vikram. Now, it's possible that there were two sets of keys—one with Rustam and another with Nidhi. But did the killer really retrieve the key from Rustam’s pocket? The fingerprints on the lock must have belonged to Nidhi.

Whoever the murderer was, they had not only fooled the police but had also left me scratching my head.

Once again, I turned my car toward that universe-level beauty’s flat. Something had been bothering me, and I needed to talk to her about it. But the real challenge was—how would I bring it up? Even so, I was heading there to find some way to talk to her.

I rang the "Jahangiri Bell" at that Taj Mahal-like house, a bell that kept ringing for quite a while. The door opened, but to my surprise, instead of that beauty, it was a housemaid standing there. She gave me a questioning look.

"Who do you want to meet?" Even the maid had a melodious voice, probably influenced by her mistress. I smiled slightly at my own thought.

"Pammi Madam," I had barely finished my sentence when I saw Pammi approaching from inside.

"Well, handsome! Did you forget to ask something earlier, or is there another reason for your visit?"

As soon as she arrived, the maid quietly slipped away.

"That’s the thing, Pammi Madam... I plan to go somewhere else, but somehow, I always end up here," I half-sang a line from a film song.

This time, there were no bells, gongs, or trumpets—just a charming smile from Pammi. She moved aside to let me in. I followed her inside, still scanning for something that had startled me earlier in the morning.

"What are you looking for, Detective Sir?"

This time, I sat down on the same couch I had occupied earlier in the morning, without waiting for her to signal.

"I’m not looking for anything... I actually came to warn you," I said in a mysterious tone.

"Warn me about what?"

I noticed a faint hint of worry cross her forehead.

"Vikram has told the police about the suspicion he shared with me regarding you," I set the stage for our conversation.

"So what? I haven't done anything wrong, so why should I be scared? If anything, I lost ten lakh rupees because of that man!" she replied in a slightly irritated tone.

"Look, the police believe a woman was involved in the murder because they found a woman’s panty near Rustam’s body. Now that Vikram has pointed fingers at you, the police will surely come knocking on your door —if they haven’t already."

I fixed my eyes on her, waiting for her response.

"No, they haven’t come yet," she replied, sounding a little concerned.

"Now, let me tell you what I was looking for earlier. The bra I saw in your house this morning was of the same color and design as the panty the police found near Rustam’s body."

I locked my sharp gaze on her beautiful, crimson face.

"Oh, come on! The company that made that set must have produced only one piece and gifted it exclusively to me?" Pammi’s smile looked a

bit faded this time. My heart ached at the sight.

"No, but the police will simply apply the two-plus-two logic—your close association with Rustam, plus the identical lingerie, equals your involvement in the case."

"You should check your wardrobe to see if that bra-panty set is still complete."

"How would I know which color set you're talking about?"

"Maroon. Check and see. If your panty is missing, believe me, you're in big trouble."

Her face darkened. "Okay, I'll check now."

As that walking, talking Eiffel Tower of beauty disappeared from my sight, I suddenly heard hurried footsteps behind the curtains. But after a moment, I dismissed it as my imagination.

A few moments later, Pammi returned, holding only the maroon bra in her hands. The lines of worry on her forehead had deepened.

"Only the bra is here. The matching panty is missing from the drawer."

I studied her face carefully.

"Your panty didn't just vanish on its own."

"I swear, I have no idea where it is! And I definitely didn't leave it with Rustam."

Her crimson glow seemed to have been cursed by an evil eye.

"I completely believe you, but the police won't. Out of 6.5 billion people, no two individuals have the same fingerprints. Similarly, the chances of two women Rustam was involved with owning identical lingerie from the same brand are impossible."

She looked at me desperately. "Then what should I do? Should I burn this bra?"

She grabbed my hand, making my heart race. I still couldn't believe that

such delicate hands were capable of murder. If I had believed it, I would have gladly taken the blame for the crime myself—because I simply couldn't bear to see a beautiful woman in distress.

"If you're innocent, why are you scared?"

I had unconsciously switched from formal to informal speech—probably due to her touch.

"You're the one scaring me!"

She looked at me with adorable innocence.

"Then tell me—how did your panty end up there?"

"I swear on you, Anuj! I have no idea. I haven't worn that set in the last fifteen days. Think about it—if I had left it there, wouldn't both pieces be missing, not just one?"

She had a valid point.

"It seems like someone deliberately planted your lingerie at the crime scene to frame you."

Pammi's crimson glow slowly returned. "You're absolutely right, Anuj. That must be it!"

She clutched my hand even tighter. "But the real million-dollar question is—who took your panty and placed it at the crime scene?"

Her grip on my hand tightened further. She knew her weapons well. Every beautiful woman knows her impact and exactly which arrows to shoot. And trust me, her charm had fully worked on me.

I needed to figure out who was trying to frame Pammi.

"Could it be Vikram?" she suddenly exclaimed. "He came looking for Rustam at my house about a week ago!"

"How did Vikram get access to your wardrobe?"

"He never sat down. He stood near the couch, yelling about Rustam, while I argued back."

I asked, "Was anyone else home that day?"

"Only me and my maid. I live alone."

I thought for a moment. "Could it be that Vikram came back when you weren't home and convinced or threatened your maid to steal your panty?"

Pammi's face turned pale. "I have no idea... Should I call her so you can ask her?"

"No. You ask her casually and let me know."

I assured Pammi, "If you're innocent, tell the police everything truthfully. Truth can be troubled, but it can never be defeated."

Just as I left her flat, I heard the screeching of a police jeep outside. Inspector Nar Singh had arrived.

Now, I would see if Pammi told the truth to the police as she had told me. If she did, I would keep my silent promise to protect her. If not, I would ensure the entire universe worked to prove her guilty.

Chapter 12

The True Face of Cleopatra

The next day, my informant asked me to meet him around noon at Deep Cinema Market in Ashok Vihar. Deep Market used to be Deep Cinema back in the day, but about thirty-six years ago, a storm of unrest swept through this country, reducing Deep Cinema to ashes. In the years that followed, its owners transformed it into a shopping complex, and today, it was widely known as Deep Cinema Market in Ashok Vihar.

I was no stranger to the streets of Ashok Vihar. My very first murder case, The Bansal Murder Case (read The Dead Man in Danger), had landed me here. And now, here I was again, standing in the same locality. After a brief wait, my informant pulled up on his bike next to my car.

"Guru, I hope you didn’t have to wait too long," he said as he parked his bike beside my car.

"Not at all. I was just taking in the view when you showed up," I replied casually.

"Come on, Guru! What's there to see here? Let me show you the real view up close," he said, his eyes glistening with mischief.

"Listen, kid. We're not here for sightseeing. We're here for business. And while you're with me, keep that in mind at all times," I chided him lightly. This rascal couldn't keep his mind off distractions, even while on the job.

"Guru, you get mad even at casual talk. What am I supposed to do if there's a breathtaking sight right in front of me? Gouge my eyes out?" he muttered in frustration.

"No, don’t gouge them out. Just keep them pure. You can think whatever you want, but don’t let it show on your face or in your eyes," I advised him, offering some wisdom for free.

"Got it, Guru! This is why I made you my mentor. You should be a

world leader! Now, are we heading out, or do you have more wisdom to share?" He bowed dramatically with both hands joined.

"First, park your bike at the nearby police station. It'll be safest there. If anyone asks, just mention Sharma Ji's name," I instructed. Without argument, he sped off towards the police station, just a few steps away. Five minutes later, he was back in my car, ready to go.

"Guru, take a turn and stop in front of Kulachi Hansraj School. That's where our 'beauty with a blade' lives," he said as he settled into the seat.

The mansion where we rang the bell was at least five hundred square yards in size. Renting such an expensive property for "business" meant the lady running the show was no ordinary woman—she had serious connections.

A young man, around twenty or twenty-one, opened the door.

"Madam doesn't meet anyone this early in the morning," he said gruffly.

"My dear boy, it's almost 1 PM. Do you still think it's morning?" I shot back.

"This house wakes up after 7 PM. Everyone is asleep right now," he replied in the same tone.

"What is this, America? Does the sun rise here at 7 PM?" I quipped.

"Hold on a second, Guru," my informant interrupted. He pulled the young man aside and whispered something in his ear. Within moments, the guy nodded in agreement and disappeared inside. My informant turned back to me with a smug grin. Soon enough, the doorman returned.

"You may go in. Madam is calling you," he said, sounding like he'd just lost a fortune. My informant smirked at me victoriously and walked ahead, leading the way. I followed his steps.

We entered a spacious hall. As soon as we stepped in, a young woman approached and gestured for us to sit on the plush sofa.

"Please wait. Madam will be here shortly," she said before vanishing

behind a set of heavy curtains.

A few minutes later, Madam made her grand entrance. The moment I saw her, a song played in my head—
"A thousand pieces of my heart scattered… some here, some there..."

Standing before me was my dream girl, my Cleopatra, an Ajanta-Ellora sculpture come to life, a Taj Mahal in human form. And yet, the shock on her face was nothing compared to the shock I felt seeing her here.

"Anuj, you?" Pummy's voice, laced with disbelief, no longer sounded like the chime of a temple bell—it was more like Himesh Reshammiya's nasal twang.

"That's the very question echoing in my mind, madam—YOU, here?" I threw her question right back at her.

"Now that you're here, there's nothing left to hide," Pummy sighed as she stepped closer and lowered her voice.

"Guru, you know her?" My informant stared at me, wide-eyed.

"Yes. I met her just yesterday—twice, at her home," I explained.

"Damn! All my effort to track her down was wasted," my informant sulked.

"No, my dear apprentice. Nothing is ever wasted. In fact, coming here is going to be a major breakthrough," I said, my words laced with meaning.

"Then why were you so shocked to see her here, Guru?" This damn informant wouldn't stop pressing my sore spots.

I wanted to yell,
"People build new worlds whenever they wish…
They wear a thousand faces on a single face."

But I restrained myself. Instead, I decided to change the subject.

"Pummy Ji, why don't you have a seat? After all, this is your kingdom," I gestured to the sofa.

It seemed she was waiting for my invitation. She immediately settled down across from me. Just then, the same girl reappeared, pushing a snack cart. Clearly, the madam had arranged everything in the most extravagant way. Yesterday, at her home, she hadn't even offered me a cup of tea!

The girl served each of us snacks on separate plates and handed us steaming mugs of aromatic coffee. The moment I wrapped my fingers around the coffee mug, all my anger, frustration, and resentment vanished. Coffee was my first love—everything else came after.

I had to stay focused. I wasn't here to judge anyone's business; I was here to solve a murder case. But damn this heart of mine! It always betrayed me.

"Last night, as I left your apartment, I heard a police jeep pulling up. Did they visit you?" I started the conversation.

"Yes, an inspector from the station—his name was Nar Singh—came by. He was asking about the very thing you had warned me about," Pummy admitted.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"I told him what I had promised you. Then they took something belonging to him for forensic testing. They said they would discuss things further after the results," she replied truthfully.

"Do you know what kind of shady dealings Rustam was involved in before he died?" I finally asked the real question.

"He worshiped money. If he got paid, he'd even steal a shroud off a corpse in the crematorium," Pummy sneered for the first time while speaking about Rustam.

"But he had been doing such things for a long time. Why was he killed now?" I pressed on.

"Every person's death is written in destiny. His time was up, and so he died," she said philosophically.

"Where were you between 4 PM and 7 PM on the day Rustam was

murdered?" I looked at her with suspicion for the first time.

She immediately caught my expression. "Are you suspecting me?"

"Until the murderer is caught, we suspect everyone," I said, my tone firm. Pummy shifted uncomfortably.

"I was here that day," she answered hesitantly.

"Which day?" I asked pointedly.

"The day before his body was found," she clarified.

I smirked. "You seem to know every little detail. Keeping a close watch, are you?"

"You yourself warned me that my neck could be on the line. I'm just staying informed," she said defensively.

"If I need to meet you again, should I come to your house or here?" I asked one final question.

"Anywhere, anytime. Every door is open for you," she said softly.

I stood up. "Alright, Pummy Ji. If needed, I'll see you again."

As I walked out, I couldn't help but think—
"People's dreams shatter here…
Because every face hides a mask."

Chapter 13

Maid – A New Puzzle

From there, my next stop was Pammi's house in Keshav Puram. I needed to get to the bottom of this woman, and apart from the housemaid, there was no one better suited for the job. I left my informant in the car outside and walked towards Pammi's flat. I rang the doorbell. When there was a delay in opening the door, I rang the bell again. This time, someone rushed toward the door. The same girl from yesterday opened it.

The moment she saw me, her face went through a series of expressions. The fear on her face and her disheveled hair made it evident that she was preoccupied with something inside.

"Sir, madam is not home," she stammered.

"I know… I am here to meet you. But why do you look so frightened?" I asked as I gently pushed her aside and stepped in.

"Sir, please come when madam is home. If I let someone inside in her absence, she will be furious with me. She might even fire me," the girl whined.

"That's not a problem! I'll give you a job myself," I said casually as I walked further inside.

"Sir, where are you going? Whatever you need to ask, you can do it here," she tried to stop me with her words.

"What's your name, girl?" I asked in a firm, authoritative tone.

"Priya, sir," she replied.

By the time I asked her name, I had already entered the inner room. The scene inside immediately revealed why she was so nervous and why she had taken time to open the door.

Inside, a young man, wearing nothing but underwear, was lying on the bed with earphones in his ears, completely engrossed in his mobile

phone. He was so absorbed that he didn’t even notice my presence in the room. I glanced at him briefly before stepping back outside. Priya was waiting for me with a pale face, her eyes welling up with tears.

"So, this is what you do when your mistress is away? That too on her own bed?" I said, fixing my stern gaze on her.

"Sir, I made a mistake! I swear I won’t do it again… That scoundrel always comes here to bother me… I didn’t invite him, sir!" she sobbed.

"But you did let him in, didn’t you? And now that you’ve been caught, you’re putting all the blame on him? I should inform your mistress about this right away," I said, taking out my mobile phone from my pocket.

"No, sir! Please don’t do that! Madam will fire me… Where will I go in this big city?" she pleaded, falling at my feet.

"Get up," I said sharply, taken aback by her reaction.

She looked up at me with tear-filled eyes. I had no intention of harming this girl. If she was having fun in her mistress’s absence, it was none of my concern. But I needed answers, and keeping her scared was the only way to get them because, under normal circumstances, she wouldn’t talk.

"Stand up! If you answer my questions truthfully, I won’t tell your madam what you do on her bed when she’s away," I said, watching her as she wiped her tears.

"Ask me anything, sir. I’ll tell you whatever I know," Priya said hesitantly.

"Do you know Mr. Rustam?" I asked my first question.

She nodded in agreement.

"Then you must also know Vikram," I continued.

Again, she nodded.

"Then you must be aware that Mr. Rustam has been murdered?" I linked my next question to the previous ones.

"Yes, sir, I know," she said, this time speaking instead of just nodding.

"Do you have any idea who might have killed him?" I asked, even though I wasn't expecting an answer.

"No, sir, I don't know anything about that," she replied innocently.

"What kind of relationship did Rustam and your madam have?" I changed the angle of my questioning completely.

She looked at me silently as if trying to gauge my reaction before answering.

"They had an illicit relationship," she said softly.

"Like the one you have with the guy inside?" I asked. She hesitated for a moment but then nodded in agreement.

"Have you ever seen Rustam and your madam in such a situation with your own eyes?" I asked, though I already suspected the answer.

"Madam never kept anything hidden in this flat. Even when they were in the bedroom, they would call me in to fetch things," her eyes and voice revealed she was telling the truth.

"Have you seen madam with Vikram in the same way?" I asked, keeping my eyes fixed on her.

"Many times! Almost every time he came over," Priya admitted in indirect words, confirming that Pammi was having an affair with both men.

Pammi's secrets were unraveling before me, and the more I uncovered, the more my suspicions pointed toward her.

"Was Rustam here the day he was murdered?" I asked, eager for her response.

"I don't remember exactly, but I don't think he came that day. Vikram did, though," Priya said hesitantly.

"Did your madam and Vikram have an argument that day?"

"No, sir, Vikram was in a very good mood that day. He went straight to the bedroom with madam. But sir, can I say something? Vikram treated madam like his wife. He ordered her around like a husband, and she obeyed him as a wife would."

"Did Rustam never treat her that way?" I smirked slightly.

"No, sir. Madam used to insult Rustam all the time… To her, he was nothing more than a dog," Priya revealed something new.

Pammi had completely fooled me yesterday, or maybe I had let myself be fooled by her beauty.

Now, the biggest question was not how Pammi's underwear ended up near Rustam's dead body but how and when these people transported Rustam's body to that flat. It seemed likely that he was murdered elsewhere and his body was later moved.

However, if Pammi was involved in the murder, why would she leave behind such an incriminating piece of evidence? That would only ensure her downfall.

I reached my car, lost in these thoughts.

"Boss, did you settle down there or what? You took so long!" my informant quipped.

"Listen, you have to go to Amritsar today itself for an important task," I said, starting the car.

"Alright, boss! What's the job?" he asked.

I explained the details of his mission, listing the people he needed to investigate. I was beginning to see links between this case and Amritsar.

After briefing him, I sent him off in an auto with some travel expenses and then headed to meet Nidhi at her flat.

When I parked my car outside Rustam's office, I ran into Manohar, one of his employees.

"How are you, Pyarelal?" I greeted him in my usual style.

"Sir… Our well-wisher is gone… Without him, how do you think I'd be?" he said with a sad expression.

"Life goes on, Manohar. We have to keep moving forward," I said philosophically.

"That's true, sir. But this pain will take time to fade," he sighed.

"Is Nidhi madam inside?" I asked to change the subject.

"Yes, she hasn't stepped out since the funeral," Manohar replied.

I followed him inside, preparing to get more answers from Nidhi.

Chapter 14

Archery in the Dark

After leaving from there, I once again found myself sitting in front of Inspector Nar Singh at the police station. Today, I wanted to systematically connect all the facts of this case with Nar Singh. In every murder case, we have to analyze every detail with great depth. A slight mistake on our part could either push the criminal out of our reach or send an innocent person to the gallows. Both scenarios were unacceptable for anyone who upholds the law.

"So, detective sir... how far is the murderer from your grasp?" Nar Singh's voice had a slight tinge of sarcasm.

"The murderer will soon be caught, sir! But first, tell me—have you formed a picture of the killer in your mind, or were you just waiting for me?" I returned Nar Singh's sarcasm, coated in sugar.

"Just waiting for a forensic lab report... Once it arrives, we will reveal the killer in front of the press and media," Nar Singh said, referring to the forensic report of the bra and panty.

"So, you've already decided that Pammi could be Rustam's murderer?" I threw a subtle shock at Nar Singh.

"How do you know that?" A flicker of surprise crossed Nar Singh's face.

"Sir, when you arrived there last night… I had left just a little while before you. Along with the rest of the neighborhood, I also heard your jeep's siren."

"Ohh! So, you're running one step ahead of the police, anuj!" Nar Singh chuckled.

"What can I do! You have government protocols to follow, but I only need to trap people with my words."

"You're right, Anuj… We can't lay hands on anyone without solid evidence. And in this case, the only evidence we have is a panty, and we don't even know whose it is," Nar Singh admitted.

"The evidence isn't there because we're looking in the wrong place. We will find evidence at the actual crime scene," I said, looking intently at Nar Singh.

"You have a point, Anuj… But so far, we have no information about that. So where do we even start looking for evidence?" Nar Singh sighed in frustration.

"Tell me, did the CCTV footage reveal anything? Did any vehicle stop near Rustam's flat that night?" I inquired about the CCTV footage.

"We've got footage up to the alley's entrance, but no vehicle was seen entering the lane. Unfortunately, all the buildings in that alley are residential, and there are no CCTV cameras installed," Nar Singh replied helplessly.

"Can I get that CCTV footage? I want to analyze it from my perspective," I asked.

"Give me your email ID. I'll send all the footage to you today itself," Nar Singh said.

"So far, from my questioning, Vikram and Pammi seem to be the prime suspects," I shared my thoughts with Nar Singh.

"I also suspect Pammi the most. Many beautiful faces hide entirely different realities," Nar Singh remarked cryptically.

"So, even you were mesmerized by her beauty?" I teased.

"No, for us police officers, this is a daily affair. Most cases involve land, women, or old rivalries," Nar Singh shared his experience.

"In this case, you'll find a mix of all three—just wait for the layers to unfold," I told Nar Singh.

"I feel like taking Vikram into custody and questioning him strictly. He will spill everything!" Nar Singh was ready to use his police methods.

"Wait a bit… Who knows, we might not even need such methods. The murderer may come forward and confess," I said confidently.

"Right now, we're just groping in the dark," Nar Singh grumbled.

"It's not completely dark. There's enough light to see the murderer's shadow. Soon, his face will be revealed too," I assured him.

"This whole Pammi angle… It was Vikram who first mentioned her to us. What if Vikram is the real mastermind and has brought Pammi into the picture just to mislead us? Maybe the presence of that bra along with the panty at Pammi's place is part of a setup," Nar Singh speculated in the right direction.

"Now you're thinking straight, sir. I had the same thought. Just wait for tomorrow—after Rustam's fourth-day ritual, we will bring his murderers to justice," I said with conviction.

"Are you also thinking along the same lines?" Nar Singh asked me.

"I am thinking in multiple directions simultaneously. But I believe all those paths will eventually lead to the murderer," I said philosophically.

"Good, Anuj! The ACP is going to hold another meeting regarding this case today. I'll discuss these new facts with him," Nar Singh said with renewed enthusiasm.

"Alright, sir! I'll head out now. If anything new comes up in this case, I'll keep you updated," I said, getting up.

"Wait, where are you going? I completely forgot to order tea or coffee while we were talking," Nar Singh said, embarrassed.

"I'll have coffee next time, sir. Right now, I need to head to my office," I said, extending my hand for a handshake. This time, Nar Singh shook my hand warmly.

I left Nar Singh's office and headed toward my own. My phone had suddenly buzzed with a message from Ragini, informing me that a woman was waiting for me at my office. That was why I had to excuse myself from Nar Singh—otherwise, I would never refuse coffee.

At my office, apart from Ragini, the woman waiting for me turned out to be Rustam's sister. I was surprised—how did she find my office? Then I remembered I had given her my card.

"You're here! I was planning to visit you tomorrow," I gestured for her to enter my cabin. Ragini and she entered together.

"Ragini, get some tea made… I left everything at the police station as soon as I got your message," I said, smiling at Ragini.

"Naresh is already on it, sir," Ragini replied. She first gestured for Rustam's sister to sit on a chair, then took a seat next to her.

"What happened to your brother was unfortunate… The police still have no clue about his murderers," I started the conversation.

"My brother Rustam's life was like that—he spent his entire life making enemies. There was no one—no family, no friends—who actually cared for him. He lived by suppressing others with his power," Rustam's sister portrayed her brother's character accurately.

"First, tell me your name," I realized I didn't know her name yet.

"My name is Satwant Kaur, but everyone at home calls me Santo," she replied.

"You are Rustam's younger sister?" I asked, looking at her.

"No, he was two years younger than me. When we lived in Amritsar, he wasn't like this. He changed after moving here. But he never did me any wrong… In fact, when we arrived in Delhi, broken and lost, Rustam gave us shelter, and later, he transferred that house to my name without taking a single penny," Santo spoke about Rustam with gratitude.

"But your sister-in-law, Nidhi, claims that you took over that house unlawfully. She said he had only allowed you to stay temporarily, but later you refused to leave," I countered with what I had heard from Nidhi.

"That wretched woman will say anything! When she married into our family, she had nothing. Her father couldn't even afford to feed the wedding guests. My father paid for the entire wedding," Santo vented her anger.

Ragini and I exchanged amused glances at her reaction. The conversation had just started, and it seemed like a long night ahead.

Chapter 15

She With the Sharp Eyes… But….

The next day, around eleven in the morning, I was seated in Dimple's drawing room, right in front of her. Dimple was a girl of about twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, with sharp and well-defined features. Her mannerisms and lifestyle had added to her beauty. Though her complexion was dusky, her striking eyes and sharp features had an undeniable charm that could attract anyone.

"So, you've finally seen in real life what kind of a strange museum specimen a detective actually is," I said with a smile, looking at Dimple.

"Oh come on! You look more like a movie hero than a detective. I mean, with such a chocolate-boy face, why would you choose such a dangerous profession like detective work?" It seemed Dimple also had a habit of making witty remarks.

"Why I became a detective… I'll write a book about that someday. But let's focus on the real issue for which I am here." I looked into her kohl-lined eyes as I spoke.

"Of course! Go ahead, ask whatever you want," Dimple replied, this time in a slightly serious tone.

I had just opened my mouth to ask the first question when a maid entered with a tray of tea. Dimple handed me a cup and took one for herself. I kept observing the maid carefully—her face immediately reminded me of Priya. It felt as if Priya herself was standing in front of me, a spitting image of her.

Dimple noticed how intently I was looking at her maid and smiled slightly. By then, the maid had already placed the tea and left.

"What's the matter, sir? Have you fallen for my maid?" Dimple teased, feigning mock anger.

"I just felt like I have seen her somewhere before," I said casually.

"Oh, please! This old-school pickup line worked in the 80s. This is the 21st century, dear detective!" Dimple smirked.

"I hardly get time to meet the ones who are already interested in me. Why would I waste my efforts wooing someone new?"

"So, shall we start talking about the case now? The tea is finished as well," I said, looking at Dimple.

"Absolutely, your highness!" Dimple exaggerated her tone playfully. She was either overacting or just too excited to meet a real detective for the first time.

"You are fighting the court case against Rustam on behalf of your uncle, right?" I began with something I already knew.

"Yes… but civil cases in our country drag on for so long that sometimes a person dies waiting for a verdict," Dimple sounded tired of the court proceedings.

"How did these people manage to seize such a prime bungalow in Ashok Vihar? And how did they even forge the property papers?" I continued.

"I don't know how my uncle got trapped by these people. Initially, he had rented out the bungalow for one lakh rupees to a woman named Gurpreet Kaur," Dimple recalled.

"Gurpreet Kaur, alias Pammi, is one of their own. I feel like they are all part of a gang," I told her.

"You're absolutely right. This is a family-run scam. One person pretends to be a property dealer and arranges the deal, another family member rents the property, and then someone else forges documents to claim ownership. They mostly target properties owned by NRIs who rarely visit India," Dimple explained, painting the whole picture for me.

"What's the current status of the case in court?" I asked.

"Nothing much, just endless dates and hearings. And now that one of them has died, the case will drag on even longer," Dimple said, slightly frustrated.

"On what grounds did they claim ownership of the bungalow?" I wanted to know.

"They are very cunning. Rustam first got my uncle to sign a power of attorney, which allowed him to rent out the property and take care of it," she said, looking at me.

"And then?" I asked, locking eyes with her.

"Then, they replaced that power of attorney with a forged one. They copied my uncle's signature so perfectly that even my uncle himself was momentarily confused about whether he had actually signed it or not!" Dimple explained in astonishment.

"But a forensic examination could still prove that the signatures were fake," I pointed out.

"But they played an even bigger trick. They filed a fraud case against my uncle instead!"

"What trick?" I was getting more curious about this scheme.

"Using the forged signature, they created duplicate property documents. Then they filed a case claiming that my uncle had sold them the property using these fake documents and demanded the original ownership papers from him!" Dimple explained.

"And you are fighting this battle alone?" I asked.

"My uncle has only one son, but he has mental health issues. That's why my uncle took him to London for treatment, and they eventually settled there. I am the only relative left here to fight for him. He doesn't want his ancestral property to be stolen, but he can't leave his son's side either. So, I have to fight this battle for him," Dimple told me.

"So, if something happens to your uncle, these people will automatically get the property. They have planned this entire scam very thoroughly," I remarked.

"Under whose name did they forge the property papers?" I asked again.

"Rustam," Dimple replied.

"But the actual possession is with Pammi and Vikram. You must also be aware that they are now running a prostitution ring from that bungalow, with Pammi in charge," I added.

"I know… that's why it's even more heartbreaking," Dimple said in a dejected tone.

"But if anyone benefits from Rustam's death right now, it's your uncle. Could he have had Rustam eliminated?" I asked, looking at Dimple.

Her face immediately turned rigid with disapproval.

"I told you yesterday, we don't believe in bloodshed. If my uncle wanted Rustam dead, he wouldn't have wasted years in court," she retorted in a slightly irritated tone.

"If, God forbid, something happens to your uncle, who would inherit the property?" I asked.

"His son, obviously," Dimple replied.

"But his son is mentally ill, possibly even legally incompetent. That means he can't inherit anything. In that case, who would be the rightful heir?" I gazed into her dark eyes.

"We have a huge family. I don't know who he would name as the heir," Dimple replied vaguely.

"So, Rustam's death doesn't benefit you at all?" I asked again.

"Only the ones who currently occupy the property stand to gain from it," Dimple was now losing her patience.

"Explain that to me. How would they benefit?" I threw the question back at her.

"The person who could forge fake signatures for Rustam can just as easily forge his signature to transfer the property to themselves," Dimple replied.

"Who is this forger? Do you know them?" In her excitement, Dimple had let slip a crucial detail.

"No! I don’t know anyone like that… but this is your job, detective. You should find out who does this kind of work," she challenged me.

"You’ve made an excellent point, miss. Not only are you beautiful, but you’re also quite intelligent," I flattered her, knowing well how much women appreciate compliments.

"Took you long enough to notice my beauty!" Dimple was back to her playful banter. It was my cue to leave.

Outside, I ran into the maid again. Priya flashed in my mind once more.

"Do you know a girl named Priya?" I asked her.

"Yes, she’s my sister. She used to work here before, but she got me this job and moved elsewhere," she answered without hesitation.

Meeting Dimple had uncovered a new angle—who was the forger behind Rustam’s fake property papers? Rustam had many enemies, but none strong enough to take his life. He had always tormented those who were already beaten down by fate. How could such people kill him?

At this moment, I missed my informant. He would surely know someone involved in making fake documents. If I could find that person, I could connect the dots myself.

Chapter 16

The Arrival of Mohan Pyare

I wasn’t getting much help from my informant in this case. Though informants are the backbone of every detective and the entire police department, they don’t always hold the key to every lock. That’s why I was now on my way from Safdarjung Enclave to Keshavpuram Police Station. I needed access to the criminal records of someone who had previously served time for forging documents.

When I reached the station, Nar Singh was once again absent. However, I saw Sub-Inspector Dilbagh Singh approaching from the front. He was the officer in charge of the Rustam murder case. As soon as I spotted him, I walked toward him.

"Is the officer not in today? Has he gone somewhere?" I asked. He recognized me instantly.

"The officer is in court for a hearing. He’ll be back by evening. If there’s anything I can help you with, let me know," he replied. I figured Nar Singh had already informed him about me.

"Let’s sit in your office and talk," I suggested. He led the way, and I followed him inside.

"Please, have a seat," he said in his typical police tone. I slumped into the chair opposite him.

"Tell me, sir, how can I assist you?" he asked again.

"It’s not for me, but for the case you’re investigating. If we solve this case early, you, too, will earn a commendation," I said, making it clear that what I needed was actually part of his job. This was my signature style.

"In that case, I’d be even happier to help," he said with a smile.

"This case has revealed a new angle—people using forged documents to forcibly seize properties, then dragging the real owners through endless

court hearings until they either give up or settle outside court," I explained.

"That's quite an angle, sir," Dilbagh nodded.

"I need the police's help. Is there anyone in this area who has been jailed for making fake documents?" I asked.

"But, Anuj Babu! These people can hire someone from anywhere. It's not necessary that they got their documents made by local forgers," Dilbagh pointed out.

"But I want to follow a lead. A man involved in this trade will likely know others in the same business. That's how links are formed, one after another," I explained my approach.

"I know someone in Jahangirpuri who used to make fake driving licenses. When I was posted at the station there, I arrested him two or three times. But every time he got out, he went back to his old business. If he can be of any help, I can give you his address. Besides, I'll check our station records and update you by evening," Dilbagh offered.

I noted down the details of the man in Jahangirpuri. He didn't have a phone number, but that wasn't an issue. I just wanted to meet him to understand more about their operations. Before leaving, Dilbagh gave me some tips on what to say and whose name to mention to gain the man's trust. I thanked him and left the station.

By now, I had reached the block in Jahangirpuri where Dilbagh had sent me. The area was full of cramped, twenty-five-square-yard houses and narrow alleys. Despite its dense population, it was a well-known hub of criminal activities. I knocked on the door of a house, and a teenage girl, around nineteen or twenty years old, opened it.

"I need to meet Mohan Lal," I said, giving her a quick glance.

"What do you want from that drunkard?" she scoffed.

"I'd rather discuss it with him," I replied, ignoring her sarcasm.

"Who are you chatting with, you wretched girl?" A man, around thirty-five, emerged from inside, rubbing his eyes.

"Here’s your beloved Mohan, have a good look. The idiot passed out drunk last night. I don’t know how he even woke up at your voice," the girl mocked, this time directing her taunts at Mohan rather than me.

"Are you Mohan Lal? Kareem sent me," I said.

The moment I mentioned Kareem's name, his expression changed completely.

"But he’s in jail… Have you met him?" Mohan asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"We were in the same barrack. He’s in for a long stretch, but I got out yesterday. I had some work, so Kareem bhai told me to meet you. He gave me your address," I said, repeating exactly what Dilbagh had instructed me.

"If he vouched for you, then you’re one of us. Come inside," Mohan said, leading me into a small, dimly lit 8x8 room.

"Tell me, what do you need? A fake passport or some other document?" he asked.

"I need property papers forged. Can you do it?" I threw the bait.

"I’m not that big a player, but I can introduce you to someone who’s a master in this trade. His forgeries are so perfect that even government officials get fooled," Mohan boasted.

"That’s exactly the kind of work I need," I said.

"But this business costs a lot," Mohan hinted.

"Money isn’t an issue. The work must be flawless. I’ll pay handsomely," I assured him.

"Then what’s in it for me? I don’t work for free," Mohan finally revealed his true colors.

"Don’t worry, Mohan Pyare. When the rain falls, you’ll get your share of drops too," I replied in my usual style.

"Fine, when do you want to meet him?" Mohan asked, his eyes gleaming

with greed.

"As soon as possible. If possible, let’s go right now," I said.

"Give me some time to freshen up," he said, grinning as he stepped outside.

Twenty minutes later, he returned, now looking more presentable.

"Let’s go, it’s just a short drive to Wazirpur village," he said.

I drove us to Wazirpur village, a once-rural settlement now part of Delhi’s urban sprawl. Parking my car at the outskirts, we walked through the narrow lanes to a freshly painted house.

"Wait here, I’ll check if he’s inside," Mohan said and went in. A few minutes later, he returned with a man.

"This is Girish bhai. I told him about your work. He’ll handle it," Mohan introduced him.

"I’m Anuj," I said, shaking Girish’s hand.

"Let’s not discuss this on the street. Come inside," Girish said.

Inside, Girish asked, "What kind of papers do you need?"

"I need to forge property documents. It’s our ancestral home, but legal disputes have complicated things. I want the paperwork in my name to delay court proceedings since I already have possession," I lied.

"It’ll be done. Do you have any original documents?" he asked.

"I only have a few papers with the owner’s signature. I need you to use those to recreate the entire set," I replied.

"It’ll cost half a percent of the property’s value," he said confidently.

"Done," I agreed, but I needed proof of his past work.

Girish hesitated before finally showing me a diary listing previous jobs. My hidden button camera recorded everything.

"See you tomorrow with the advance payment," I said.

The next day, I returned with fifty thousand in cash. The sight of money blinded Girish with greed, confirming he had fallen into my trap.The Next Step in the Investigation
The next day, around noon, I was once again sitting in Girish Bhai's room, on the same chair where I had sat the previous day. But this time, Mohan Lal was not with me—I had paid him his fee yesterday and sent him on his way. A bundle of fifty thousand rupees in crisp five-hundred-rupee notes was already lying on the table in front of Girish.

The aura of money is so powerful that it can completely consume a person's ability to think and reason. Anyone who brings money is instantly perceived as genuine—at least in the eyes of the one receiving it. At this moment, Girish had fully accepted me as a legitimate client because I had kept my word.

"Girish Bhai, my work will be done for sure, right? I've already assembled an entire team of lawyers to win this battle," I said, looking at him with a tone of flattery.

"Rest assured, Anuj Babu! Just as you are reliable in making payments, we are just as reliable in our work. The only difference between yesterday and today is that yesterday, you were just a potential client—today, you are my client. And that makes it my duty to give you complete confidence in my work," he replied.

Saying this, he pulled out a diary from the cupboard behind his chair and opened a page before placing it in front of me. I leaned forward slightly, ensuring that the page came fully into the view of the hidden button camera on my shirt. However, playing the part of a genuine customer, I quickly closed the diary and slid it back toward him.

"Come on, Girish Bhai! If I didn't trust you, would I have placed fifty thousand rupees right in front of you without even being asked? I have complete faith in you," I said in the tone of a seasoned businessman. A look of satisfaction spread across Girish's face.

"Your documents will be ready within a week. Sleep peacefully! Many people have secured properties using papers made by us," Girish bragged, his ego swelling.

Every person has an innate desire for others to know how significant they truly are. This hunger exists in everyone—from a small-time tea vendor to a billionaire. And right now, that same hunger was surfacing in Girish.

"Then you must be a really big deal, Girish Bhai! What's the most high-profile property you've ever forged documents for? One that earned you so much commission that you could live off it for the rest of your life?" I asked, using flattery to coax the truth out of him.

"There was one such opportunity! But the other party turned out to be dishonest. That scoundrel betrayed me—but God made sure he got what he deserved," Girish said, making a sour face.

"Who was this guy, Girish Bhai? The one who even managed to deceive you?" I asked, my curiosity growing.

"Forget it, Anuj Bhai! I don't want to spoil my mood by taking that man's name," he said, looking at me disinterestedly.

"Come on, Girish Bhai! If you keep it bottled up, it'll only upset your stomach. Better to get it out and just ruin your mood for a bit," I joked, laughing meaninglessly. Girish joined in with a chuckle.

"He's dead, man—just three or four days ago," Girish said nonchalantly.

His words hit my ears like a hunter's whistle to a tracking dog.

"What? Did something happen to him?" I asked casually.

"There's a saying—'A thief will always meet his end.' That's exactly what happened to him," he said, continuing his story while my hidden button camera recorded every word.

By the time he finished, my mind had cleared of all doubts. However, I still hadn't received any message from Dimple regarding her uncle. So, I decided to contact Rustam's sister again.

I called Ragini and asked if she had noted down Santo's details from yesterday. But Ragini never left her work unfinished—she had already recorded Santo's full name, address, and phone number.

I took Santo's number from Ragini and dialed it. I asked him for the number of Dimple's uncle in London.

It turned out that Santo had an entire file on all the people involved in this property scam, including the rightful owners of the mansion.

The work that Dimple hadn't done in 24 hours, Santo completed in just 24 seconds.

I called the number. It took two attempts before someone answered.

What I heard on the other end of the line was shocking enough to blow my mind.

Without wasting a second, I called Ragini again and assigned her an urgent task.

Given the new revelations, my first priority now was to head straight to the police station and meet Nar Singh.

Chapter 17

Final destiny

At this moment, I was sitting in the police station in front of Nar Singh, in his office. I had made him aware of all the facts of the case. After that, all the people related to this case were called in a hurry. Those who couldn't come voluntarily were forcibly brought in.

About two hours later, inside the police station's private room, apart from Nar Singh and me, Nidhi, Vikram, Gurpreet Kaur alias Pammi, Pammi's maid Priya, and her lover Ramesh were also present. Along with Nar Singh, all eyes were fixed on me. Just then, Dilbagh Singh entered with Rustam's sister, Satwant Kaur alias Santo.

I glanced at everyone present in the room. I noticed that four or five armed constables had already been stationed at the door. Dilbagh Singh himself was standing against the door.

"This story revolves around two close friends—Rustam and Vikram. About fifteen years ago, when they were around thirty years old, they started a housing project. They lured hundreds of people with dreams of owning a home and then embezzled nearly two crore rupees before fleeing to Delhi. With that much money in hand, settling in Delhi was not difficult for them. Rustam and Vikram both bought separate flats in the same area. Their friendship remained strong for years, even after coming to Delhi. But cracks started to appear when Vikram discovered that Rustam was having an affair with Gurpreet Kaur alias Pammi—who, in reality, was Vikram's wife."

"What nonsense are you talking about? I will kill you!" Pammi shouted angrily upon hearing this.

"Stay quiet! Let Anuj finish his words before anyone else speaks," Nar Singh's stern voice silenced the room.

"You will have plenty of opportunities to drink my blood—I will serve it to you in a coffee mug. But only after I finish my point," I said, smiling at the so-called beauty queen.

"But why did you accuse me of having an affair with Rustam?"

"I have a witness who can confirm your illicit relationship. Shall I bring her testimony?" I responded, losing my patience.

"Anuj, do not answer anyone's questions—just continue with your story," Nar Singh instructed me.

"So, as I was saying, Rustam and Vikram's friendship soured because of Pammi's relationship with Rustam. They were also business partners in the real estate sector. However, instead of legitimate property dealings, they specialized in fraud—seizing properties through forged documents. They had connections with individuals skilled in creating fake ownership papers. Using such fraudulent documents, they took possession of a mansion in Ashok Vihar, whose owner was living abroad. Due to his only son's mental illness, the owner could not return to India. Taking advantage of his trust, Rustam and Vikram forged the property papers in Rustam's name and took over the mansion. The unique aspect of this scam was that the real owner had to spend years in court trying to prove his legitimate ownership, often losing hope along the way. Either the actual owner would forget about the property, or they would be forced into an out-of-court settlement."

I paused for a moment and observed everyone's expressions. Vikram, in particular, was visibly uncomfortable, shifting restlessly in his seat.

"But this very mansion in Ashok Vihar became the reason for Rustam's downfall. Since the forged property papers were in Rustam's name, Pammi saw an opportunity and got involved with him. Rustam, already enamored by her beauty, welcomed her advances. However, once Vikram discovered their relationship, he began to feel insecure. He feared that Rustam and Pammi would one day push him out of the equation like an unwanted fly in milk. He started insisting that the property documents be altered to include his name as well. However, this was impossible because the real owner had already taken the matter to court. But Vikram failed to grasp this."

"This is all about them, but where was Rustam murdered, and how was his body disposed of? Get to that quickly," Nar Singh impatiently asked me.

"Have some patience. I will reveal both the murder and its motive together," I said, flashing a slight smile at Nar Singh, who fell silent.

"Rustam's death was the result of countless curses. He had deceived so many people that many wished for his demise. This is why there were multiple suspects, but no solid evidence against any of them. However, the ones who ultimately killed Rustam were people we would never have suspected—ordinary individuals.

"Sir, arrest Priya, her lover Ramesh, and also Pammi," I declared.

As soon as I said this, fear washed over the faces of all three of them.

"What have I done? Why are you arresting me?" Pammi screamed again.

By then, two female constables had already grabbed her arms. However, Priya and Ramesh did not display any signs of regret.

"Wait! The story isn't over yet," I added, intensifying the suspense in the room.

"By now, everyone must be wondering what fraud Rustam could have possibly committed against Priya and her lover that led them to kill him. The truth is, these so-called innocent people are professional hitmen—they kill for hire. They were planted as workers in Pammi's house two months ago with the sole purpose of killing Rustam. However, Pammi was unaware of their intentions at the time. Unfortunately for her, she got caught in the web later. And now, as you can see, she stands among criminals. But there is one missing piece—the fourth player in this conspiracy. The real question is, who gave the order to kill Rustam?"

Once again, all eyes were on me. Until now, everyone had been fixated on Priya and Pammi.

"Who was it?" This time, it was not Nar Singh but Rustam's sister, Santo, who asked the question.

"Ragini, please bring Madam inside," I ordered loudly.

A woman with sharp features, a slightly dusky complexion, a beauty mark on her cheek, and deep dimples entered the room, escorted by

Ragini, who held her wrist firmly like a police officer.

"This is Dimpy Madam. I happened to meet her just yesterday morning, and the information she provided led me to solve the murder case," I said, looking at Nar Singh. His expression revealed that he still hadn't fully grasped the situation.

"Dimpy is the niece of the rightful owner of the Ashok Vihar mansion. She was representing her uncle in the legal battle over the property. However, her uncle had passed away two years ago, leaving behind only his mentally ill son, who is currently in a hospital in London. Initially, she fought the case out of loyalty to her uncle, but after his death, her honesty gave way to greed. That mansion spans 500 square yards and is worth no less than ₹50 crores today. The prospect of acquiring even a fraction of that wealth made her willing to do anything.

"Priya previously worked as a maid at Dimpy's place. She discovered that Priya's lover Ramesh was a contract killer. Seeing an opportunity, she arranged for Priya to get a job at Pammi's house, ensuring that Rustam's murderers gained easy access to him."

"And what about Nidhi's undergarment found near Rustam's body?" Nar Singh asked.

"It was likely already lying in the apartment Vikram and Nidhi used as their love nest. So, when Rustam's body was dumped there, it just happened to be present."

"So, who are the final suspects?" Nar Singh asked.

"Dimpy, Ramesh, Priya, and the celestial beauty, Gurpreet Kaur alias Pammi," I declared.

"Lock them all up!" Nar Singh ordered.

As this happened, Santo placed her blessing-filled hand on my head, tears of mixed grief and relief in her eyes.

"Because of you, my brother's killers are going to jail," she said gratefully.

"Dilbagh, lock all of them up in the cell and make arrangements to

present them in court tomorrow. And get tea and coffee for everyone. Oh, and make a strong coffee for Anuj Babu because from now on, I'll be seeking his help in every case. I have accepted him as my mentor today," Nar Singh declared, his words followed by a loud burst of laughter in the room.

"But sir, please listen to one humble request from this poor man… I won't be getting any fees for this case, so at least get my fifty thousand rupees back from that fraudster," I said, looking at Nar Singh.

"Don't worry about your money! That fraudster will be picked up soon… and I will also file a case against Vikram for forging documents. Except for Nidhi, everyone else will go behind bars for this case," Nar Singh stated firmly.

Hearing this, the fearless-looking Vikram suddenly turned pale, while Nidhi was the only one who breathed a sigh of relief.

At that moment, Santo stepped forward and placed her blessing-filled hand on my head. Her eyes were brimming with a mix of sorrow and relief.

"Because of you, my husband's murderers are going to jail… Don't worry about your fees. It will reach you soon," Nidhi said as she came closer to me. Her words brought a smile to my lips.

"Forgive me, Nidhi. I doubted you for my brother's murder," Santo said, joining her hands in apology.

"Not at all, sister! You are elder to me, and you have every right to say whatever you feel… Why would I take offense?" Nidhi replied, gently taking Santo's folded hands into her own.

Ragini looked at me and smiled softly… By then, coffee had arrived for everyone. Forgetting everything else, I indulged in my favorite pastime—sipping my strong coffee.

The End.